

FANTASTIC STORY

WINTER 25c

MAGAZINE

featuring:

THINGS PASS BY

by Murray Leinster

THE WORLD THINKER

by Jack Vance

SWING YOUR LADY

by Kelvin Kent

A THRILLING PUBLICATION



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FANTASTIC STORY MAGAZINE

A THRILLING
PUBLICATION

VOL. 8, No. 1
WINTER ISSUE

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J. E. SMITH, President
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A DEPARTMENT WHERE SCIENCE-FICTION READERS AND THE EDITOR MEET

HOW GOOD are your eyes? They're probably better than you think, even if you wear glasses. Astronomers, who have developed stellar photography to a high degree, are now becoming increasingly aware of its limitations. The human eye has a sensitivity that the finest photographic emulsion can't match.

One illustration of this occurred earlier in the year when a French astronomer, Dr. Robert Jonckheere of the Marseilles Observatory, announced the results of a test he had made in recording the size of the Great Nebula in Andromeda.

Dr. Jonckheere conducted his first experiment in the winter of 1952-53, and waited until the following winter to confirm it and then publish his findings. What he wanted to do was to measure the size of the Andromeda Nebula through binoculars and compare the results with those of the best astronomical photos.

Andromeda, or M-31 as the astronomers call it, is the galaxy nearest to our own, and is only 1,500,000 light years away. (Until recently, astronomers estimated its distance at 750,000 light years, but new findings made them double

this figure.) The Andromeda spiral appears as a hazy patch to the naked eye, and can be seen just to the right of the familiar Cassiopeia W. With the aid of binoculars, a remarkably clear view is possible.

However, to see the full size of the Andromeda Nebula, you have to prepare your eyes. Dr. Jonckheere recommends that any observer remain for at least ten minutes in darkness with his eyes open. Furthermore, the point of observation should be away from all external light.

Then, when looking through the binoculars, you should be sure to center the eyepieces on your eyes, so that both pupils are fully used and are receiving the maximum amount of light from Andromeda. If these precautions are taken, Dr. Jonckheere says, you'll be able to see the size of the Nebula much more clearly than in the best photographs.

5,000,000 Years From Now

It has always been our feeling that science fiction writers can say more about the future than the vast majority of professional scientists.

(Continued on Page 110)

THE COVER STORY

THIS month our cover illustrates Bryce Walton's story, **MOON OF THE WORLD**. We're calling your attention to the story because of the unusual psychological insight it shows.

Walton writes about the possible effect of space travel on a person not psychologically suited for it. Of course, he didn't write the story to illustrate a point, but he tells us that he's been curious for a long time about how individuals will react to the strains of space flight. He thinks that there'll be a great deal of opportunity for the psychologists and psychoanalysts to ply their trade, and in **MOON OF THE WORLD** you'll see one doing so, helping the hero meet his problem squarely.

Walton has written comparatively little science-fiction for the magazines in the last couple of years principally because he's been spending fourteen hours per day on television assignments. However, we've got a man watching his typewriter, ready to grab any other stories like **MOON OF THE WORLD**.



THOUGHTS HAVE WINGS

*You Can Influence Others
With Your Thinking!*

TRY IT SOME TIME. Concentrate intently upon another person seated in a room with you, without his noticing it. Observe him gradually become restless and finally turn and look in your direction. Simple—yet it is a positive demonstration that thought generates a mental energy which can be projected from your mind to the consciousness of another. Do you realize how much of your success and happiness in life depend upon your influencing others? Is it not important to you to have others understand your point of view—to be receptive to your proposals?

Demonstrable Facts

How many times have you wished there were some way you could impress another favorably—get across to him or her your ideas? That thoughts can be transmitted, received, and understood by others is now scientifically demonstrable. The tales of miraculous accomplishments of mind by the ancients are now known to be fact—not fable. The method whereby these things can be intentionally, not accidentally, accomplished has been a secret long cherished by the Rosicrucians—one of the schools of ancient wisdom existing throughout the world. To thousands everywhere, for centuries, the Rosicrucians have

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Things Pass By

A Novel by MURRAY LEINSTER

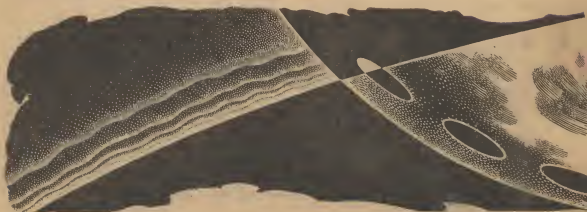
I

FAR, far away, multiple billions of miles off in empty space, Things moved toward our sun. They were arranged as a warlike space fleet. There were scouts and advance guards fanned out ahead. One of the scouts had already passed beyond Sol. The main body of the Things was an enormous distance behind, but there were thousands of them.

They moved at a rate almost inconceivable to human beings. Their engines were powered by forces yet un-

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Illustrated by VIRGIL FINLAY





*The Things from deep space were moving toward the sun . . .
and Dirk Braddock knew that they would destroy civilization!*

dreamed-of by men. They did not decelerate as Sol drew relatively near. Our sun was a convenience in space navigation—no more.

The occupants of the Things had no interest in it. That it had planets was a matter of no concern to them. That two billion human beings lived upon one of the planets affected them no more than knowledge of an ant city in its path would affect an army.

The peoples of Earth might be obliterated, as an ant city would be destroyed by the passage of an army, but the occupants of the Things could not know, and would not have been interested. To them, it would not have seemed important.

However, it happened that on the ant-hill called Earth there was a man named Dirk Braddick. Because of him, Earth is not now an uninhabited, crumpled ball, with its continents mere salt-mud marshes, and its seas swept by five-mile-high tidal waves as the Things go by.

The Things have not the faintest idea what happened. They probably do not care. But we do. This is the story of Dirk Braddick. . . .

THE first of the cosmoquakes was relatively mild. Earth's seismographs went crazy, and Sun's photosphere burst into frenzied eruption. There were casualties here and there, and earthquakes of varying intensity followed. Possibly a thousand people, together, died as a result of the first cosmoquake. But it was really very mild indeed.

Two weeks after it happened, but not at all as a result of it, something came down out of black, swiftly-moving clouds above Dirk Braddick's laboratory. It was night, and the clouds moved swiftly toward the north.

The inverted, cup-shaped thing swayed objectively as it descended. The dangling object below it oscillated wildly. When it was a thousand feet high, it was two miles south of the laboratory.

When it was five hundred feet up, it was still a mile away, and the agglom-

eration of buildings which enclosed a square courtyard was utterly invisible. There was not a light to be seen.

The parachute came on down, swaying and spinning, flung through the darkness by the wind. The inert, pendulum-like object under it made no effort to guide it by tugging at the shrouds. There was nothing in sight to seek to avoid or to try for. There was only a noise underneath, which was tree branches clashing in the wind.

They were very near. Something whipped at the descending figure. Then there was clear space below. The oscillating object swung high and cleared the ridge-pole of the big shed—latest addition to the laboratory. The figure under the parachute missed the ridge-pole, dropped crazily just beyond. The parachute spilled air in the eddies of air above the buildings—and the figure hit the ground.

The parachute, at the same instant, hit the projecting corner of a building and ripped noisily, flapped wildly for a moment, then lay caught and torn against a building wall.

The figure struggled up, staggered, and collapsed again. It lay still. The dark clouds overhead hurried on to the northward. A broadcast-powered plane above the ceiling emitted a bleating, panic-stricken call on a secret wave group.

Dirk Braddick slept the peaceful sleep of a man who has worked contentedly at something on which he wants to work, and will resume the process in the morning.

In the corner of one of the laboratory buildings, an electronic watchman hummed softly. Its circuits circled the laboratory, shifting current-values in unpredictable patterns so that no neutralizer could possibly analyze the fields and allow an intruder to approach the buildings unnoticed. But it had not scanned the sky overhead. It made no report.

A long time later the sky cleared. Later still, the sun rose and morning

came. Dew dried, bird songs became commonplace. The sun floated high over the horizon. The still figure on the ground among the laboratory buildings stirred again. It got weakly to its feet.

It was a girl, who stared about with a haunted, hunted look in her eyes.

Then Dirk Braddick came out of a door and saw her, and stopped short. The girl seemed to shrink at sight of him. She turned as if to flee, but only walls and closed doors surrounded her.

She turned and faced him defiantly, white to the very lips.

"Hello!" Braddick said evenly. "So Atomic Power is using girl spies now, eh? And dropping them by parachute! I'll have to put some detector-fields overhead."

He saw by the girl's clothing that she had hit hard. When she moved, he saw her wince a little.

"Hurt yourself?" he asked. "I'll get a doctor if you like, and have him take you in to town. I'm not especially harsh to spies. In fact, one might be useful right now."

The girl's pallor increased, if anything. She gasped:

"Please—no doctor! Don't tell anyone where I am! Not anyone . . . Who are you?"

Braddick raised his eyebrows.

"You don't know? All right. I'll play! I'm Dirk Braddick. This is my laboratory. And you're a lady spy for Atomic Power, I think. Aren't you?"

"No! No! I—I'm—" Then she caught her breath and wrung her hands. "I don't know! I—don't—know—who I am! Oh, help me, please!"

HER distress and terror, at any rate, were real. But Braddick looked even more suspicious, for an instant.

"You'd better sit down and have a cup of coffee or something. Do you hurt any place particularly?"

"All over," she said unsteadily. "But I don't think there are any bones broken. I—know your name. I can't remember anything about myself, but realize that

I know your name. You're an inventor. You invented the broadcast-power tube, and the D.C. transformer, and something to do with metal casting, I think."

She looked at him with a hunted hopefulness. He nodded.

"I don't like the term inventor," he said drily. "Those things were byproducts of definite scientific research. But there's nothing very wrong with your brain."

He led the way into the house. Robot servants produced coffee, and then a complete breakfast. The girl sat down, trying hard to keep calm and cool. But her hands trembled. She drank the coffee while Braddick took an extra cup. The hunted look in her eyes increased as she contemplated her own thoughts.

"Look here," Braddick said presently. "Even if you're telling the truth, you've had a bad scare. After you've had something to eat, go and lie down. Sleep a bit. You'll wake up feeling like yourself. Then you can set about spying or whatever you came for. If you don't feel all right then, I'll call a doctor."

"No! Please!" She went instantly into something like a panic. "Please don't call a doctor! I've got to hide!"

"Why?" asked Braddick casually.

"Because I—because—" The helpless terror in her expression was pathetic. "I don't know! I don't know who I am or anything! But I know I've got to hide."

"The police?"

"I'm not any more afraid of them than anybody else," the girl said helplessly, after an instant. She made a hopeless gesture. "I feel queer. I don't know who I am, but that doesn't frighten me so much, now. I have a feeling that if—if I can only stay hidden for a time, it will all come out right."

"It sounds," said Braddick drily, "like a very bad excuse for a spy to hang around my laboratory. I'm really a sort of psychologist, you know. My specialty is the mechanics of research. But I test my theories about how to make discoveries by using them to make discoveries.

As you mentioned, I've made a few. Atomic Power wants to know what I'm up to now. I've been trying to get something from them, and they think I've something up my sleeve. If you're a spy, a good report from you might help me to make a deal. Hence my cordiality."

The girl licked her lips. She seemed tense. She saw his eyes upon her.

"Atomic Power—that means something to me," she said shakily. "It frightens me—I mean, the name of the company. I . . . Do you really think I'm a spy for them?"

Braddick shrugged. "Maybe. Maybe not. But they certainly want to get into my laboratory. I've had to fire the few men who did work for me, because every one had been got to with threats or money."

"You're working on something secret?"

Braddick shrugged again. "I wouldn't say secret. Just impossible. There was a rather queer phenomenon a couple of weeks ago. They called it a cosmoquake. Remember?"

The girl's expression changed. Braddick's lips quirked wryly. She remembered that. But it would be hard to imagine any shock obliterating the sensations of a cosmoquake. It was called that because there had never been such a thing before, and "earthquake" certainly did not describe it. Earth seemed to have been shaken, not in one place but all over, as a terrier shakes a rat.

Speaking roughly, for one and a half seconds at 14:06 Greenwich mean time of May 1, 1992, everybody on nearly all the northern hemisphere felt the ground seem to drop away underfoot in a slanting direction. That was the first phase.

THEN, without a pause, the sensation reversed and the ground seemed to rise horribly for another second and a half. In the southern hemisphere, the effects were exactly reversed—the feeling of rising came first, and that of falling afterward. But it was not exactly the same at any two spots on the globe.

Slanting across the equator over a wide belt of territory, it seemed that Earth was being jerked from underfoot so that people and things were tumbled generally to the northward, and later that it was being jerked in the opposite direction so that they tumbled generally to the southward again.

The force of the cosmoquake was nowhere overwhelming. Water in small shallow ponds tended to overflow. Mostly, however, the two impulses were so nearly equal in duration, and so nearly opposite in sign that there was no great damage.

Some chimneys fell. There were a great many traffic accidents. But the damage done by the cosmoquake itself was much less than that caused by violent local earthquakes which followed wherever geologic faults existed.

The thing was inexplicable. It really appeared that not only Earth but the whole cosmos had experienced some hitherto unknown phenomenon. There was a monstrous increase in solar disturbances to lend color to the theory.

But Braddick had used a new discovery in his own specialty—the study of research methods—and within three days had submitted a paper to the *Philosophical Journal* on the cosmoquake.

In it, he pointed out that the observed effects on the Earth and Sun could have been produced by a body of twelve sols mass passing through the Solar System at a speed approaching that of light, along a line from Polaris toward the Southern Cross and at a distance of some six hundred million miles from Earth.

The paper was rejected, but its contents leaked out. Someone who had read it quoted it at length as an example of how wrong a man like Braddick might be. His explanation, of course, was as impossible as the event had been.

It reached the daily papers and was a source of much hilarious publicity as diverse eminent scientists condescended to point out how completely ridiculous it was.



The aim made gradually enlarging circles about that spot

But Braddick had continued to work on the problem.

In his dining room, now, he spoke detachedly.

"I have a queer and much-laughed-at idea of what may have caused that cosmogquake. There is a possibility that the same thing may happen and be much worse. So I want to get ready for it. To get ready I need mass-time fields. I've been trying to get them from Atomic Power. They won't listen, because they suspect I have something up my sleeve to break their monopoly over power. I haven't, but meanwhile they've been annoying me with spies, trying to break into my laboratory, steal my stuff and—I suspect—if necessary, kill me in defense of the corporation's business."

The girl had gone pale again.

"Yes. They would kill. They're terribly ambitious. They're ruthless!"

"Your memory's improving," Braddick said politely.

The girl flushed. A tide of crimson swept upward from her throat. It covered all her face. Then it receded, and she was pale again.

"You think I'm lying?" she asked unsteadily. "About not remembering?"

Braddick made a noncommittal gesture with his hands. . . .

Far away in space, one of the scout patrols of the Things drew nearer to the Solar System. It had been a thousand million miles away. It hurtled onward at a speed which was literally inconceivable.

While Braddick first questioned the girl from the parachute out of doors, the thousand million miles had halved. While the girl sipped her coffee and seemed to search desperately for memory, the distance of the hurtling object lessened still more.

When she spoke brokenly, denying that she lied or that she was consciously a spy, monstrous gaseous prominences burst from the Sun at greater speeds than had ever before been observed. Because as the Thing flung onward through empty space. . . .

IN THE laboratory, an alarm bell rang sharply. Braddick's face grew dark. He put his hand to the table to push back his chair. And the Earth groaned. Literally. There are millions of people who will always swear that they experienced the shocking vibration of the cry of a tortured Earth. And then horrible things happened.

It is not possible to describe them all. There were areas where human beings found themselves completely weightless, and were driven mad by the feeling that they fell upward into an empty, cloud-flecked sky.

There were other areas in which people felt themselves pressed to the Earth as if by an intolerable weight. Those sensations reversed themselves within the term of the three seconds to which cosmogquakes seemed to be limited by the nature of things. But the areas in such uncomplicated phenomena showed were the lucky ones.

There were not many casualties in Australia nor in the northeastern United States. But elsewhere!

In Rio de Janeiro, the streets were crowded. It was a normal, brisk autumn morning. Then, suddenly, for just one and a half seconds, everything in the city strained savagely toward the northeast. The crowds surged that way, screaming suddenly.

They piled up in kicking masses against brick walls, or through plate-glass windows, or they ran in irresistibly racing, shrieking panic where there was no solid obstacle to check them. And they were pursued.

Buildings leaned to the northeast, and collapsed, and bounding masses of masonry rolled and leaped after the fleeing humans. Everything, animate and inanimate, acted as if the city had been turned on edge. Everything fell toward the abyss which was the horizon.

In the forests outside the city, the jungle trees leaned and crashed. The waters of the great estuary which is the River of January began a mighty surge. For one and a half seconds.

Then the impulse ceased and reversed. Those who still remained upright found themselves hurtling in almost the opposite direction. It was not quite opposite. The impulse this time was almost due south. They ran or were flung into the rubble and the still-tumbling walls of buildings.

Those who had fallen or were crushed lay beneath walls which had not yielded to the northeastward impulse. And most of those walls now yielded to the second, reverse impulse, and crashed upon and buried the dazed injured who had been intent upon commonplace things only a scant few seconds before.

The giant *Mundo* Building, the pride of Rio, resisted the first phase of the cosmoquake. It bent dangerously northeastward, and dripped down most of its wall panels of brick and glass, but the steel frame stayed intact during the first phase.

When the second came, however, it swung in a giant arc and crashed in ruins to southward, its thousand-foot bulk covering three blocks of what had been the heart of the city. The casualties in Rio alone from this cosmoquake were comparable only to those from a saturation bombing of an undefended place.

And Rio was only a sample. Quito and Guayaquil ceased to exist. All around the globe, destruction reigned. Naples was a rubbish heap, with Cairo. Calcutta no longer was. Teheran was a dust-pile.

And—somehow more pathetically—in that wide band of death all around, it was not only large cities that were struck. Isolated villages and hamlets, even individual houses, crashed in ruins, all too often upon their occupants.

In three successive seconds the peoples of Earth suffered destruction and death to a degree they had not been able to inflict upon themselves in two world wars. Then it ended. Earth was still again.

In Dirk Braddick's laboratory he went desperately white. His eyes burned.

"That," he said in a forced calm, "was a second cosmoquake. It was worse than the first. There will be others still, and they will be worse yet! I don't think I'm exaggerating when I say that I think the end of the world is at hand if something isn't done about it. Now—are you a spy for Atomic Power?"

The girl licked her lips. Her eyes were strange and troubled, but they met his desperately.

"I'm not," she said unsteadily. "Honestly! I'll swear it by any oath you can contrive!"

"That's too bad," Braddick said grimly. "I've got to make that deal somehow, and if you were a spy you could help. I suspect it's going to be a tough one, but I've got to go ahead." He smiled sardonically. "The worst of it is, I'm afraid they'll take it as a business matter, and a swell opportunity to murder me. The men who run Atomic Power are that sort!"

He rose from the table and headed for the communicator. On the way, with a scornful gesture, he flung on the switch of the broadcast visiphone.

II

THE Atomic Power Company, you may remember, was founded by a young man named Brent who made a mass-nullifier on purpose, and discovered that he had made a time-field by accident. In consequence he had found the secret of atomic power.

He made a field generator which lessened the mass of any object within the circuit of the cable through which the field-generating impulses surged. As a necessary corollary, it increased the time rate of the object affected.

A watch, for example, put into the mass-nullifying field with its mass reduced to one-hundredth of normal, ran one hundred times as fast. But the field could reduce the mass of an object contained in it almost to actual zero, with a time rate to be expressed only in astronomical figures.

And when Brent, after divers adventures put mildly radio-active elements in the mass time field, he speeded up their rate of disintegration under strict control so that they were highly useful sources of power.

In fact, before his death, Atomic Power produced more than half the horsepower used in Earth's industries. In twenty years more it produced ninety-seven-point-three per cent of all the fixed generator power used on the planet. And the power tubes lately invented by Dirk Braddick promised to give the corporation a monopoly of all the power used on Earth in any form.

But it was not an amiable corporation by that time. It was too big to be human. Its higher executives were in positions of power, with riches practically equal to the headship of nations. They were the subject of such feverish ambition as no other "private" employment ever fostered.

By the very nature of the mass time field, too, it was too dangerous a device for its principles to be publicly known. Power was generated by its means in giant power stations turning out millions of kilowatts.

The few technicians who understood the process were sworn to secrecy, enormously rewarded, and guarded by national as well as company secret police against threats or attempts at bribery. But the business policies of Atomic Power were under no such guard to prevent the undesirable.

In 1992, Atomic Power was nearly a tyranny. Its monopoly of cheap power gave it almost life and death power over industries. And obviously the little men in the organization, hoping feverishly for promotions, developed a cold-blooded ruthlessness for the purpose of impressing their bosses.

An explosion apparently wiped out all of Brent's heirs, in 1991. The ownership of the majority of the company's shares was thrown into trusteeship for the courts to settle, while the men who managed the company no longer had to ac-

count to anyone but purely hypothetical future owners of the majority stock.

They then set to work to secure themselves in their jobs and their power, which was great enough to begin with. For a time, it looked as if Atomic Power would end up trying to run Earth.

But to Dirk Braddick, that morning, it looked as if there soon might not be any Earth left to run. He put in a call for the head of the giant corporation, and while he waited for the call to go through, the broadcast visiphone verified his worst fears.

A commercial visisplay was still being broadcast when the screen lighted up. Before he put in his call, the commercial was abruptly cut. A well-known NAB newscaster announced curtly that a second cosmoquake had shaken the whole of Earth. An impromptu sequence of newscasts would follow until the damage had been assessed.

Instantly a dark-featured man with a cut on his temple read hoarsely from flimsy sheets in his hands. His hands shook. The entire Amazon River basin had been wiped out. Belim was a shambles, made so by fires which had sprung up in the debris caused by the cosmoquake.

He turned his head to receive a fresh batch of flimsies, and blood trickled down the side of his face and into his collar. He read on, his face twitching and his voice hoarse. Rio—Pernambuco.

HE WAS cut off. The first newscaster cut in again.

"Damage in the United States is great, especially in the southern parts and in California. Transport planes are being made ready to carry doctors, nurses, and medical supplies to areas of greatest destruction. Notice to all doctors and nurses. If casualties in your community are less than one per cent of the total population, report to the Red Cross for orders."

His face flashed off. A sun-browned man spoke harshly:

"Mauna Loa, here in the Hawaiian Islands, is beginning its greatest eruption in history. Evacuations are proceeding at top speed. Honolulu is partly destroyed. Earth shocks of mounting intensity are practically continuous. We do not know what is coming—"

Braddick's private visiphone call came through. The face of the head of Atomic Power looked out. Rogers, chairman of the board, was obviously shaken by the event just past, but his features would never really thaw.

He said crisply, "My secretary said you called me about this thing that has just happened. What is it?"

"They call it a cosmoquake," said Braddick. "I know what it is. There are more coming and worse—much worse! I have a chance of doing something about them. I need mass time field power units and a technician—an engineer who can design and build the units I want in the sizes and for the purposes I'll specify. I can work out the field if I have to, but I'm in a hurry. How much?"

"It's impossible!" said Rogers sharply. "We don't allow outside experimental work with our fields!"

"Your own men will handle this one," said Braddick, "and I'm in no mood to bargain. I need those field units, and I need them fast! Your life as well as mine is in the balance, and the life of everybody else on Earth. Your company won't be worth much if Earth is depopulated!"

Behind him, newcasters flashed successively on the screen, each with a curtly told tale of tragedy. In the Baltic, the cosmoquake impulse had not been overhead and then underfoot, but almost half the way around the horizon. In consequence, a tidal wall of water a hundred feet high had overwhelmed lower Sweden.

"You're an alarmist," said Rogers, though still pale from his own experience in the cosmoquake. "You're an inventor, not a scientist. I'll wait and see what the physicists say."

[Turn Page]

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"Meaning," Braddick said coldly, "you want to know what I'll offer. All right. I'll waive all royalties Atomic Power owes me, while I have a technician at my disposal."

Rogers' expression was frankly that of a shrewd bargainer now. A dyed-in-the-wool business man will be a business man until the heavens fall.

"Not good enough."

The visiphone muttered behind Braddick. All along the western edge of Europe cities lay in wreckage from the twisting effects of the cosmoquake there. Eastern Asia was hard hit. Southern Africa was smashed. The loss of life was terrific.

"Then I'll give you the things outright!" snapped Braddick. "That's presenting you with a monopoly of broadcast power! If you don't know how worthless money is right now, I do! I've got a job to do!"

Rogers looked smug.

"You'll transfer those two patents," he said shrewdly, "and take a salary while our technician is working with you. Then we'll own any discoveries you make while using a mass time field. It's a deal on that basis, but no other."

"All right! I accept it!" Braddick said savagely. "One technician. No spies."

"He has to have a guard," said Rogers.

"No!" snapped Braddick. "I've no intention of being killed by an 'accident' when you think you've got everything you can. Send your man here fast!"

BRADDOCK cut off the visiphone. Almost at the same instant the girl shut off the broadcast instrument. She was as white as marble.

"There've been more people killed in the last five minutes," she said shakily, "than—than in centuries of wars!"

"Quite so," said Braddick, seething, "and the rest of us are slated to follow them. Look here! I've just made a deal with Atomic Power." He repeated the terms of the bargain, his voice sardon-

ic. "That's the price I have to pay for trying to save Rogers' neck, among others. I'm telling you this because I still think you're a spy. If you are, you'll have a decent technical education, most likely, and I need technical help badly. Will you work for me for awhile? You'll still be working for Atomic Power!"

The girl went white. "I told you I was afraid of the name of Atomic Power! If its men come here—"

"They're coming," said Braddick grimly, "even if you're telling the truth. You don't count. I don't count. Nothing counts but getting this job done, and I can't spare the time to try to work out the mass time field for myself. But if by any chance you're really trying to hide from somebody—do you want to leave? Are you broke? By the way, have you looked in your pockets for identification?"

She licked her lips and nodded.

"I looked. There's nothing. But if you really begged yourself to get something you need to work with, if it's that important, I'll stay here and try to help."

"What can you do?" he demanded. "I've got to build a spaceship. I've got to design a space drive. I've got to—Heaven only knows what I've got to do or how long I've got to do it in!"

"I'm a fair draftsman," she said unsteadily, "and I do know some physics. But you can't make a space drive! There's never been a spaceship except rockets, and they—"

"There's going to be one now!" said Braddick. "It's going to be made right here! I've got some gadgets that will help. Come on over to the drafting board. Since you don't know your name, I'm going to call you Jane. . . ."

Far, far away, the Things hurtled on. Two of the far-flung scouts—light weeks ahead of even the advance guard—had already passed Sol. They went on toward their unguessable destination. Their velocity was an infinitesimal fraction less than the speed of light.

Because of their speed, the mass of

the Things was monstrous. Einstein first established the law by which objects near the speed of light gain mass. At their speed, the Things had an effective mass of twelve sols each—twelve times the mass of the Sun which is the center of the Solar System.

Yet they were not large. They would not have showed even as pinpoints in the largest telescopes on Earth.

But in their light fast progress through Sol's family of planets, each of the first two had shaken the Sun to fury, and the first had made a turmoil on Earth, and the second had wrought havoc. With thousands of others to follow. . . .

For the next twenty-four hours, Braddick worked in a frenzy of sustained effort. He was perhaps a queer sort of person to save the Earth, and probably a queerer one still to have made three fortunes by really practical inventions.

His real line was psychology, and his passion was the technique of research. It was his lifework to study the methods by which discoveries are made, and to devise new techniques by which research could become more effective.

He discovered a neglected principle of discovery and set to work to write a paper explaining it. To show how it worked, he undertook research to make a direct current transformer.

He carefully noted down every single step in the effort.

WHEN his paper was published, he absently noted that he had a valuable property in the discovery he'd made to prove a psycholological point.

A second paper on another point of research technique yielded as a by-product a vacuum power tube, which handled unprecedented amounts of power without even a heated filament.

A third paper had to be illustrated by an actual bit of research, so Braddick made a step-by-step log of the process of discovering a new method of casting metals, by which castings could be made

with such accuracy that they needed no machining.

It had not occurred to him that he would make machine tools almost obsolete, except for the making of first models—but he did. And he did not have to worry about money after that.

His laboratory had been built on an isolated sixty-acre tract he'd bought with the proceeds from the DC transformer, and made nearer to his heart's desire with the profits from others. Now, in the heterogenous mass of machinery and apparatus in the various silent buildings, he could work on any type of problem he chose, in order to test his theories of research methods.

While he worked frantically, setting up the foundation for his present self-assigned task, Jane labored earnestly to translate his sketches into a highly specialized type of working drawing. A good deal of Braddick's labor was the conversion of perfectly normal bits of apparatus to uses merely allied to their original purposes.

Then the Atomic power helicopter arrived with the technician. His name was Thorn, and he was gray-haired and bulky, with an air of enormous repose and complacency. But there was another man with him—Hamlin.

Hamlin definitely was not a technician. He had the hair-trigger manner of a minor Atomic Power executive, all driving urge and dynamic air, who would perform any antic or cut any throat to impress his superiors of his company loyalty and fitness for a better job than he had.

Braddick took them straight to the big shed.

"I've got an impossible job on my hands," he told them, "and if I succeed at it, there's an inconceivable one to follow. To show you the start of it, here's a construction machine I've built. Ordinarily, you make a specialized machine-tool to turn out one particular part, and it will produce that part cheaper than any other method can do. But if you try to change the product, the ma-

chine is useless. You get efficiency at the cost of flexibility. For that reason, there aren't any mass production machines for big objects like ships and so on. It's cheaper to be inefficient and flexible.

"But this constructor is both efficient and flexible. I feed magnetronic plastics—the stuff they make houses and ships of nowadays—into this moving arm. It makes drawings in the air following drawings it scans with photo-cells. But plastic comes out of the end of the drawing arm and hardens as it comes. This thing will start at one end of a ship or a house and build it complete to the other end, following drawings only.

"It's ready to make a spaceship hull now. I need one. To power that ship I'm going to need three and possibly four mass time units. One is to include the whole ship in its influence when it's turned on. Two others are to be set up along a tube fore and aft. They needn't be big. Come along and I'll show you the rough sketches, and you can plan them out, Thorn."

The big, white-haired man shook his head, condescendingly.

"A mass time field isn't a space drive, Mr. Braddick," he said tolerantly. "I can do anything you say if Mr. Hamlin authorizes it, but—"

"He authorizes it," said Braddick. He looked at Hamlin.

"Oh, surely—surely!" said Hamlin, beaming.

Braddick asked gently. "You're the trigger-man, aren't you, Hamlin?"

"Eh? What?"

"It's an obsolete term," said Braddick. "You're to see that I have an accident if I seem likely to do Atomic Power any harm, aren't you?"

HAMLIN'S mouth dropped open. He looked scared for a moment.

"Oh, don't worry!" Braddick told him. "I'm a sucker, this time—another obsolete term. I'm not a business man. There's some dangerous stuff coming this way, and I want to go out and meet

it. "My purpose is not to make profits, but to keep people from being killed. Quaint, eh? But I'm one of the people I don't want killed. Here's the drafting room."

He opened the door. The girl he called Jane was bent over the drafting board, making a working drawing in three-colored inks, taking extraordinary pains to be accurate. She looked up, her eyes fearful. They flickered swiftly from one to the other of the men who represented Atomic Power. A vast relief seemed to fill her.

Then she turned back to her work. But Braddick had seen Hamlin's face as he'd caught the first glimpse of Jane. Hamlin had started and stared as if an enormous inner excitement filled him. He had fairly quivered, and his hand had made an obscure movement, instantly checked.

"My assistant, Jane—er—Smith," said Braddick. "Thorn, look over those sketches. I've marked where I need the smaller time mass fields. As I said, a field has also to enclose the whole ship. Give Miss Smith the outside dimensions of the apparatus you'll make to generate the fields, and tell her where they'll have to be placed. She'll provide for them. Hamlin, come here a moment."

He led Hamlin through two doors.

"I'll take that flash-pistol, Hamlin," he said quietly. "In this pocket." He pointed to the pocket toward which Hamlin had made an arrested gesture on sight of Jane. "I wouldn't try to use it. Definitely not!"

Hamlin had had a shock. He had been terrifically excited. This was a new shock. Braddick took the flash-pistol.

"Who is she that you want to kill her the instant you see her? What's Atomic Power got against her?"

Hamlin protested vehemently. Braddick listened. Then he spoke.

"She's my assistant now, Hamlin. If you touch so much as her little finger, I'll kill you. You've run into somebody at work meeting an emergency. Don't make me use emergency methods."

The first line of scouts, of which two had passed through the Solar System, drove through space toward the Southern Cross. There was an infinitesimal resistance to their movement, caused by the one atom per cubic centimeter to be found in even the remotest part of interstellar emptiness, so the drive of the Things stayed on.

They needed to maintain their velocity. Their speed gave them mass. Their mass gave them invulnerability. An object with the mass of twelve suns would not be injured by collision with a meteorite or even an asteroid.

A plunge through a planet the size of Earth itself would hardly be noticed—but the planet would explode after the Thing had gone on.

There were thousands more Things on the way. After the scouts came the advance guard. The main body was behind that.

III

JUST three men and a girl were at work to save Earth. One of the men was useless, and one was condescendingly unbelieving, but he did make mass time units of the size and power Braddick dictated. The third man was Braddick, who got things done.

In the center of the big shed, the plastic constructor worked tirelessly. It was an ungainly contrivance with an awkward-seeming arm mounted on a truck with motors and pumps and a long hose trailing from it. A cable led to a table at the side of the shed, where vivid lights showed upon drawings pinned in the vision-range of scanners.

The arm made clumsy but precise gestures, following the drawings off to one side. It had begun by putting a blob of magnetronic plastic on a stout upright at the end of its steel track. Then, for awhile, it made gradually enlarging circles about that spot.

The result was rather remarkable, because plastic flowed through the hose to the end of that moving arm; and as it

came out of the end it was shaped and hardened. It formed a cone. The forming arm, in fact, simply poured out plastic as it described a circle, and the plastic was hardened as it emerged.

A cone resulted when the circles widened, and the arm drew back. The process was exactly that of an insect, spinning a cocoon, save that the result was no mass of gummed-together threads, but a solid wall of glass-hard plastic, strong as steel, but vastly lighter. It was, moreover, practically a non-conductor of heat and electricity.

Presently the shape became more complex. The growing object ceased to be merely a cone. Guided by drawings under the harsh light of scanning lamps, the constructor built on. The cone swelled and curved.

The movements of the moving arm became more complicated. It sealed off the cone with a solid wall. Interior walls started from that. There were openings in some of them. In three hours, fifteen feet of the length of a rounded hull had been made.

Braddick stopped the constructor and fitted items of machinery into place. The constructor took up its task again and sealed the machines in as it built on further. The hull swelled still more. Its interior design became more complicated and more detailed.

The forming object grew more slowly. It took six hours to make the second fifteen feet. But the interior fittings and supplies were in place for all the completed section. From then on, the hull grew more slowly still.

Braddick's handling machines brought heavy objects and put them in place. Thorn argued tolerantly, then condescendingly installed first one and then the second of the small mass time fields Braddick demanded.

They consisted simply of tiny generators and a circular cable in which the field was formed. When fifty feet of the hull was completed—nearly thirty-six hours after the start—Braddick was red-eyed and gaunt from weariness, but

he went on doggedly.

It was then that Hamlin broke out with angry complaints. Braddick stopped work to listen to him.

"Yes," he said tiredly, "I did put on the locks so you can't go out of the laboratory. I did cut off the visiphone so you can't call anybody. I did shut off the broadcast phone so you can't even receive. I don't want to be interrupted on this job."

Hamlin sputtered. He began to threaten.

"You act," said Braddick, "as if you were aching to tell somebody about Jane, and you deny that you know anything about her. She doesn't want to be bothered. I don't know why, or care, but she means something to you, and I suspect she wouldn't like you to tell anybody's she's here. So I'm going to keep her from being bothered as long as possible. Especially since she's helping in an emergency. If you want something to think about, you might watch that contrivance over there. And if it starts to register, it would be a good idea to pray."

HE WAVED his hand at an improvised gravitometer. It was a bulky iron sphere in a cup of diamagnalloy, that artificial diamagnet which repels all magnetic substances as powerfully as even alnico magnets attract them.

The iron sphere remained at rest, free of physical contact with any other object except for infinitely thin threads which led to amplifiers. It would register any variation of gravity of even the fraction of a dyne.

The Moon's pull when overhead—which makes a difference of a twentieth of an ounce in barometric pressure—turned the appropriate dial needle one hundred points on the scale. The Sun's gravitational pull was clearly evident.

But they would not ring the alarm, because that was adjusted to show a trace of gravitational pull only from another direction—the direction of the North Star. Braddick hoped to get as

much as four hours' notice of the approach of an interstellar object with a mass of twelve sols, even though its velocity was near to that of light.

He went doggedly back to his work. He was installing oxygen tanks, clumsy and absurdly heavy, but available. Racked in place by a handling machine, they became surrounded by plastic and were then a part of the hull.

He adapted a small gas-liquefying unit to work intermittantly, freezing carbon dioxide out of part of the ship's air, ejecting it and restoring the heat and moisture to the purified air, with an addition of oxygen equal to the ejected carbon dioxide. It would keep the air breathable.

It was an enormous task that he had set himself. There was food and a robot kitchen to be installed. There were power units to be put in place—not atomic ones. There were instruments and mathematical tables and calculating machines and volumes of astronomical data and vision communicators.

There was a control-board to be wired to handle a space drive as yet untried, and which had been installed by a technician who tolerantly explained that it could not possibly work. Thorn informed Braddick, kindly, that the drive mechanism was simply an assembly of machinery which would run without having any result whatever.

And besides all this, there were doors which had to be airtight, scanners to be mounted outside the ship, and high-altitude suits to be modified.

It could not possibly be done. Braddick had a deadline which was simply any attainable time less than the minimum time possible. He worked without rest for three days. His cheeks were hollow. He moved stiffly. His eyes were dull. Then Jane caught him by the arm.

"Wake up!" she cried fiercely. "Wake up!"

He looked apathetically down at her.

"I'm awake," he said heavily. "I'm working."

"You're working in your sleep!" she cried. "And Mr. Hamlin is out in the courtyard signaling to some helicopters overhead!"

Braddick pulled himself together. He had closed the circuit of his laboratory buildings, of which the dwelling was a part, so that Hamlin could not possibly get out. It had been his thought that the space drive mechanism would be so clear to the Atomic Power technician that he would try to report it immediately to the corporation.

And then, almost certainly, Atomic Power would try to keep it as secret as the mass time fields, and by the same methods.

They would involve an immediate "accident" which would be fatal to Dirk Braddick.

His thought had been wrong, as it turned out. Thorn knew one thing by rote and was filled with a vast complacency which made it seem unnecessary for him to learn or understand anything else.

He did not fully understand the space drive.

But there was also Hamlin's desperate excitement at the sight of Jane, his furious protests over his inability to communicate some discovery to his superiors. The discovery of Jane was the only thing of importance so far. It was probably that, and Braddick was determined to protect Jane until he had time to find out about her for himself.

BUT now Hamlin had helicopters overhead to signal to. Braddick went swiftly to a doorway to the courtyard. Hamlin was waving his handkerchief wildly in an ordered but varying pattern, evidently some company code.

Braddick glanced upward. He was so tired that he had trouble focusing his eyes. Then he looked down, and Hamlin had finished. He seemed to preen himself. He looked enormously triumphant, as if he had achieved something which would send him far in the service of the company.

Then he saw Braddick, and Braddick looked at him with dull eyes, having to drive his brain by sheer will power to the contemplation of something other than the completion of the spaceship.

Hamlin went white. He shivered in terror.

Braddick did look formidable.

But then the gravitometer alarm rang stridently within the shed. It was, of course, much more important than treason or anything else. Braddick went heavily and looked at the dials. The three needles moved perceptibly as he stood there.

There was a new source of gravitational pull acting upon the iron ball. So far, the effect was so minute that only an instrument so delicate would have recorded it. The pull was less than a hundred-thousandth of the gravitational pull of Earth.

But it increased detectably as he watched. And it came from an unprecedented direction. This new, infinitesimal drag was in the direction of the North Star—Polaris. It might be a mass of twelve sols or more at a distance of multiple astronomical units, upon a course bound for the Southern Cross. By the rate of increase of the field, it must be traveling nearly at the speed of light.

"This," said Braddick, "is it. Thorn, can we test the main time field now?"

"Oh, surely," said Thorn, with condescension. He was fresh. He had worked the hours prescribed for technicians of the Atomic Power Company. He had rested and read and blandly ignored the fact that there was no broadcast reception in the laboratory.

And he had conscientiously installed the mass time field units where Braddick wanted them, and with the properties Braddick had desired. But he was aloof, with an air of bland superiority to a mere independent experimenter who was not employed by a giant corporation like Atomic Power. The ringing of the alarm-bell meant nothing to him.

IV

BRADDICK dismissed Hamlin's treachery from his mind. He surveyed the long, eighty-foot hull of plastic. He was unbearably tired, and he wondered dully if anything had been forgotten. In preparation for just such a premature warning, he had loaded materials for the completion of the spaceship inside the hull as it was built.

Less than an hour since, the constructor had sealed off the bow. The hatches were tight. There was yet no working drive, but the whole ship could be put into a mass time field by the main field cable wrapped around its middle. That, though, was all.

"What do you want done?" asked Jane, tugging at his arm. "Tell me, and I'll do it!"

"We'll test the time field," said Braddick heavily, "and I think I'll take a nap. We've all the time in the world, now."

It sounded like delirium. Braddick motioned Jane to the ladder. Thorn mounted after them. Braddick closed the outer airlock door. The inner one opened. They were in the spaceship.

It was extraordinarily unfinished. Every cubicle was piled with materials loaded in while construction went on. Braddick went to the control room and switched on the scanners outside the hull. The interior of the shed became visible on the screens.

"All set, Thorn?" demanded Braddick wearily.

"Of course," said Thorn smugly.

Braddick set the calibrated switch at thirty-six hundred and threw it. There was an odd sensation as of a sudden chill. Then everything was normal again within the spaceship—everything but the image on the vision screens. Those images swirled violently as the fixed-brightness amplifiers reacted.

The mass time field was on. The ship and everything within it had acquired a time-rate thirty-six hundred times normal. Time was telescoped within the

mass time field so that thirty-six hundred seconds inside the field exactly equaled one second outside.

While a clock ticked once in the shed or the rest of the laboratory, the clocks in the spaceship showed an hour to have passed. And of course, the frequency of the light by which the shed was visible in normal time was much too low to affect the speeded-up vision scanners on the hull.

Only the hardest of X-rays, bordering upon cosmics, had a frequency which would give the effect of visible light. The interior of the shed was shadowless. There were no variations in color. Everything seemed a single, sullen shade of red. And the metal wall panels seemed mistily transparent.

Braddick nodded exhaustedly, feeling now the three days he had worked on the spaceship hull without rest.

"We've got to test our air supply," he said heavily, "and a few other things. There's a third cosmoquake on the way, so we'll have to do everything on time field from now on. Eight hours of this time will take eight seconds of normal time. We'll know how the air works by then, anyhow."

He leaned against a wall, trying to summon energy to go on. But Jane spoke fiercely.

"You need to rest! I can test the air. You sleep, and you'll be fresher to work! We have to wait for the air test anyhow and you can do your work after sleeping just as well or better!"

Braddick considered slowly. He was worn out.

"Maybe you're right. But I don't know what Hamlin signaled to Rogers. Maybe it was about you, Jane. They can't do much in eight or ten seconds, though. Wake me if anything goes wrong."

He stumbled to one of the cubicles that had been intended as a cabin. He unrolled a bundle of bedding which had been tumbled in there as the ship was being built. He dropped on the bundle and slept instantly.

After a little, Jane looked in on him. He had not laid down; he had dropped. She went in to put a pillow under his head. As she moved him, a flash pistol fell out of his pocket. She looked at it oddly and put it back.

TIME passed. At intervals the air machine worked, freezing carbon dioxide out of the air and returning it to circulation rewarmed and its oxygen replenished. The air was intermittantly diluted, thus, with a batch of purified air, which was vastly more practical than a continuous air-purification process.

The girl glanced at the air-purity indicators from time to time. Thorn, the Atomic Power technician, strolled through the ship, yawned and blandly investigated the few books on board. There was nothing in his line. He sat down and complacently went to sleep.

More time passed, and more. The girl lunched in the robot kitchen. There was no sound anywhere but the gentle, self-satisfied snores of Thorn. Braddick slept like a dead man.

The girl had designed the ship, in a sense. At any rate, she had translated Braddick's sketches into working drawings the construction machine could use. When she finished lunch she restlessly went over the whole interior. It occurred to her to put a pump on the airlock. A vacuum in the airlock chamber would check the seals on the two doors. They were tight.

Presently she regarded the cryptic

mechanism Braddick had said could be a space drive. It was utterly simple and apparently useless. There was a powerful turbo-pump designed to produce pressures up in the thousands of atmospheres. It was installed to pump a slightly compressible liquid to the bow end of a straight, strong tube running lengthwise of the ship.

There were two mass time field generators alongside the tube. The field cables were inside the tube. When the liquid had passed through both of them, it would go back to the pump to be forced back to the bow again.

The power of the pump seemed futile. The thing was not a space drive. It was just an elaborate system of pumping water through a pipe.

Jane sat down and thought it over. Nothing could result from pumping a liquid through a pipe, however often and at however high a pressure. But Braddick had seemed sure. Jane had worked from his sketches in designing the ship, and she knew how accurately his brain worked. There must be something. The only oddities about the set-up were the two mass time field generators.


Suddenly her eyes opened wide. An expression almost of shock came to her face. She got up and went to the cubicle in which Braddick slept. She regarded him respectfully. Then she went back to the useless drive, hesitated an instant, and carefully and deliberately opened

[Turn Page]

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the case containing the field generating unit at the bow end of the tube.

She looked at the inside of the generator without surprise or curiosity. She deftly and deliberately reversed two leads. Then she took two sections of cable and as deliberately—and very proficiently—cross-connected one part of the stern field generator to a similar part of the bow unit.

These, of course, were the small field units. They were inside the ship and they were not in operation. They were in the field generated by the master time field unit, which held the whole ship in accelerated time.

She went back to the control room, moistened her lips, and started the giant pump at slow speed. For a bare instant she touched the switch which now handled both of the small mass time fields.

The whole spaceship stirred, and was still again.

She sat at the control board and looked at nothing, with shining eyes.

A long time later she rose to check the air supply again. She glanced almost automatically at the dull red images on the vision screens. She blinked. There was a change in the look of things outside.

A GREAT hole gaped in the shed outside the spaceship. Steel girders were bent and broken. Some floated in mid-air. She stared at them, but their apparent motion was slowed thirty-six hundred times by the time field which enclosed the spaceship.

The picture was like that of an instantaneous photograph of an explosion. But the explosion was still taking place. With seemingly infinite slowness, to be sure, but with irresistible force, she saw more of the side wall of the shed bending in, to be shattered in the slowest of slow motion.

She ran to Braddick and shook him anxiously.

"Wake up! Quick! *Please!*"

He opened his eyes and was instantly awake.

"What's the matter? The air?"

"No! Come to the vision screens!"

It had taken her perhaps a ship minute to realize what she saw, to run to him, and to have him back in the control room with her. In the interval, events had progressed on the vision screen as they advanced in the sixtieth of a second in normal time.

Half the wall of the construction shed was down. A girder floated with seeming leisureliness toward the spaceship. But its mass relative to the spaceship in its time field was enormous. Its impact would be slow, but irresistible.

"They're bombing!" said Braddick sharply. "Hamlin signaled them something—probably about you—and they've just had time to get orders and drop bombs, or maybe they had orders anyhow! And the drive isn't working yet! I've got to threaten Thorn into fixing it for me."

"It is working," said Jane, very pale. "Try it. I did. I looked at the arrangement and saw what you meant to do. So I adjusted the bow field to increase mass instead of decreasing it, and . . . Try it!"

He thumbed the pump switch in. He touched the field switch. The ship stirred. It dragged forward. Braddick reached to other switches. A tiny vane in the drive tube thrust out.

The ship lifted a little. It swept lightly to the end of the shed. The rear view scanners showed the monstrous steel girder float slowly and deliberately through the space the ship had just left.

"The whole thing will be coming down," Braddick said through set teeth. "I didn't build this ship to stand bombing, and I can't smash out through normal time stuff while we're in a time field. I've got to get out through that blast hole!"

His hands touched controls here and there. They fitted into his hands as if by long practice. He had more than long practice. He had made every particle of the ship. Gyros hummed somewhere. The ship backed, swung lightly

and maneuvered delicately through a slow-motion catastrophe.

It was a nightmare. The vision screen glowed sullen, tawny red. Only the outlines of objects appeared. But even in those outlines it was obvious that Braddick's laboratory was ruins.

There were three centers of motion visible even at this time rate, which meant three simultaneous explosions. The dwelling was a slowly swirling mass of debris. The tool shop was already flattened to earth. Above the warehouse in which were stores for any conceivable type of experimentation, a slender, deadly thing seemed to hang poised. But it was descending, though with a startling slowness. It was another bomb.

"There's Mr. Hamlin!" Jane said shakily.

They saw the frozen, rust-colored image which was Hamlin. He cringed from the destruction from above. He had signaled to the planes overhead, telling them something upon which Atomic Power should act. The action was destruction—including destruction of himself.

"I'm a fool," said Braddick angrily. "I'm risking too much! But—"

The spaceship settled quickly. He turned to the girl.

"When you hear me yell, turn off the main time field. When I yell again, turn it on again—and fast!"

SHAKING, Jane seated herself in the control chair. She heard Braddick fumbling at the airlock door. There was the rush of air into the vacuum she had made in the lock for testing. He went in.

"Turn it off!"

She could see everything in the vision screens. As she flicked off the main time field, the spaceship reverted to a normal time rate. Colors leaped into view, with a dazzling effect. Instantly the slow motion of retarded action became infinitely swift and deadly destruction.

The spaceship rocked with the savage crash of explosives. But Jane watched the middle right screen. She saw Brad-

dick leap into view out of the airlock, seize the pertified, horror-struck Hamlin and leap back into the airlock with him.

"Turn it on!"

Instantly the screens were tawny red again. The girl thrust in the lift control and the forward drive, and the spaceship was again silent save for the hum of gyros. It rose swiftly and sped forward. The airlock closed. Braddick came forward, breathing heavily.

"Good girl!" he said. "I don't know why I wanted to save him. I risked too much to do it. I was a fool!"

There was an astounded babbling behind them. Thorn had waked with the cataclysmic roar of the explosions. It had taken him seconds to become thoroughly awake, and then he saw Hamlin—who had not been in the ship at all—in a state of gibbering panic before him.

"Thorn," Braddick said drily, "has just realized that things are happening. Here, now, sit down in this chair. The control room swings, you remember. I'm going to put on the power."

The feeling of weight, even in the time field, had been normal. Now the sensation of heaviness increased slightly. The images in the vision screens revolved, and there was a slight shock as the drive went on to full power.

Almost instantly thereafter there were tiny, unwinking specks of light in most of the vision screens and the background behind them went dark. But there was a tawny-red mass astern and an angry-seeming dark red disk with projecting streamers off to the right.

The tawny mass behind was Earth. The specks were stars, the disk the Sun. The spaceship was out in open space, already beyond the atmosphere.

V

THERE was the curious sensation of a mass time field collapsing, and the vision screens adjusted to give the effect of normal brightness. The normal sky appeared again, all around the ship. The

stars were infinitely tiny specks, unwinking and of surprisingly diverse colorings.

The spaceship headed toward Polaris, the North Star, at right angles to the plane on which all the planets lie. The northern polar cap Earth lay below, with the northern hemisphere curiously foreshortened at the edges of the globe. It looked singularly unfamiliar.

"I'm going to get oriented and a good fix on our course," said Braddick, "before we go back into the time field. We can't make speed in a normal time rate. We couldn't make contact with what we've got to hit either, not to mention that we couldn't live half a second if we did."

There was a feeling of unusual weight. The drive of the spaceship adjusted somewhat to its mass. There was an acceleration of about two gravities, which in normal time rate meant discomfort—bearable, but unpleasant.

As Braddick worked delicately at the control board, there were frantic shouts from below. Hamlin was half-crazed by shock and terror. After three days of restless impatience in the laboratory, unable to communicate with his superiors, he'd seen helicopters hovering overhead.

Their appearance meant that Atomic Power officials wanted to know what was going on. He'd signaled the single important bit of news he knew. He had felt triumphant, because it was very important indeed.

The helicopters hovered just long enough for his news to be relayed to high officials of the corporation and for orders to come back. Then bombs had fallen. It was the one thing Hamlin had not anticipated, but it was the most natural thing in the world.

There had been an extraordinary series of accidents to everybody who had tried to make unauthorized experiments with mass time fields. It appeared that when a man set to work to duplicate Atomic Power fields, they invariably caused terrific explosions which killed

the experimenter and destroyed his apparatus.

The reason was now clear. And there had been a curious, unexplained explosion which had apparently wiped out all the direct heirs of the founder of the Atomic Power company. As a result of the disaster, ownership of the majority stock was now tied up in court proceedings which would go on for years—and the officials of the company had a free hand.

But to Hamlin, cringing and screaming as tiny black dots dropped toward him, there came despairing knowledge that the secret police of Atomic Power had become a sort of Gestapo or Okhrana, destroying all those who opposed the company or who knew too much. And Hamlin knew too much.

But he couldn't adjust to his new understanding.

He had been with the company all his life. He couldn't believe that it had meant to kill him.

And despite the fact that he was alive only because Braddick had risked his own life—and much more—to drag him into the spaceship and away, Hamlin was hysterically resolute to prove to the company that his loyalty was unquestionable and his services of infinite value.

• He began to climb to the control room, and the ship went back into normal time.

The sudden extra weight tore loose his grip on the hand holds along the wall of what had been a corridor. He fell back on Thorn and bore him to the bottom of the central well. Both men yelled as they tumbled.

Thorn shook himself and climbed purposefully again. He had no great native intelligence, but Hamlin's half-gibbered explanations had filled him with apprehension.

He meant to find out what was actually forward.

But neither had the faintest idea that the spaceship actually worked, or had left Earth's atmosphere behind.

WHEN Hamlin climbed after the technician, he had only one real thought in his mind. Somehow he must prove himself afresh to the company officials who would have let him be murdered with Braddick and Jane.

They reached the control room. Its fittings had swung about to the seeming of the vertical. Braddick was making finicky adjustments of the controls so that Polaris would center on two cross hairs on the forward vision screen. As the two others climbed into the control room Braddick was talking.

"Of course we haven't good calibration, Jane. We couldn't have. But we've nothing close to aim at anyhow. We only know the approximate course."

Thorn was struck speechless by the stars and Sun and Earth, all visible together, that he saw in the vision screens. Hamlin took one look, and the breath—and all immediately desperate resolution—went out of him. He moaned softly. But Thorn presently managed to take his eyes off the incredible sight outside.

"Look here, Mr. Braddick," he said uneasily, his air of condescension gone for once, "Mr. Hamlin has been telling me—"

His eyes strayed back to the screens, and he was unable to speak again. The Sun was off to the right. The Earth was below, so far below that it had long since ceased to have the look of a flat plain. It was a ball. The spaceship was at least four thousand miles up and still rising fast, now with an acceleration of two gravities.

"Oh, yes," said Braddick. "The helicopters bombed the lab. They blew it to bits. But we got out—on time field—and we're headed for where we've got to go."

"But"—Thorn made a little choking sound and jerked his eyes away from the screens—"this—this can't be right, Mr. Braddick! Something's happened to the scanners!"

"Of course," said Braddick, drily. "They've been moved out into space. So

have we. We're moving away from Earth."

"But we can't be!" protested Thorn. He grew almost hysterical in his effort to hold to sanity by clinging to the teachings of the technical department of Atomic Power. "I assure you, as a technician who understands the mass time field thoroughly, that it cannot possibly serve as a space drive!"

"All right," said Braddick. "Hold the thought. Meanwhile, I'm using it for one. I'm going back on time field now."

He threw over the master time field switch and the feeling of excess weight vanished. It is one of the oddities of the field that acceleration within it is entirely different from gravitation.

A person in a time field, on Earth, feels that he weighs exactly as much as before. The amount of substance in his body is exactly the same as before, despite his loss of mass, and therefore it is attracted as before. But its inertia, its resistance to gravitational acceleration, is decreased so that its response to gravitational pull is faster.

Since in normal time a man will fall at a certain speed, in accelerated time he will fall the time rate times faster, and his feeling is the same as that of normal impact of his feet upon the ground.

Under mechanical drive in free space, the resistance to acceleration is due only to any remaining mass. The mathematics may be found in any book on space navigation, but in a time field of thirty-six hundred it will be found that an acceleration in feet per second equal to sixty gravities is needed to maintain the sensation of normal weight.

Earth, turned a tawny red again by the operation of the time field, drifted visibly behind. Braddick punched a locking key and turned to the others.

"I'm going to shut off power presently and float free," he said composedly. "Better come down to the kitchen and have your lunch. Will you come, Jane?"

Jane stood there a moment, waiting to see if the discussion were finished. As

she turned to go, she knew there was plenty more to be said, judging by the unsatisfied expression on Thorn's face. These technical arguments never did seem to come to any conclusive end.

THORN said in a curiously nerve-racked fashion, "But it's impossible, Mr. Braddick! The mass time field is not a space drive. In all the years it has been in use, with all our research, nothing of the sort has been found. It can't be!"

"Only it is. Still"—Braddick spoke comfortingly—"by the terms of my deal with Atomic Power, its use as a space drive belongs to them even if they did try to blow me up. You can content yourself with that!"

He followed Jane down the ladderlike hand holes on the side of the main corridor. She stepped off into a doorway and nodded at the robot kitchen. It had swung sideward and now hung in a serviceable position, though what had been a side wall when the ship was being built was now the floor. She smiled faintly at Braddick.

"You thought of everything!" she said.

"Not quite." He pressed the buttons which would cause two ready-prepared meals to be heated and served. "I had the fills for the kitchen on hand, of course. What I didn't think of was that—well, anybody but Thorn would be able to fix that bow time field for me. I begin to think he would have considered it sacrilege."

She took the tray the service robot handed her.

"It's a beautiful solution!" she said warmly. "How did you ever think of it?"

He looked at her for an instant before he took his own tray. Then he shrugged.

"Oh, I imagined how nice it would be to have something of the sort. The trouble with rockets is that they throw away the stuff that drives them. This way, we pump a liquid into the pipe. It goes into the first time field, which makes it

much heavier. We push it astern, and get a forward reaction. Then when it gets to the stern mass field, all the extra weight is taken out again, and the sternward reaction takes place, of course, but with much less mass. Consequently it isn't equal and we go ahead. It uses up a lot of power, but—"

"No," said the girl. She looked at her plate. "I—cross-connected the two units. Putting mass into the water to push astern consumes power. But taking it out again yields it. I put the two circuits together. The second field furnishes the power to run the first one."

VI

DIRK BRADDICK put down his knife and fork.

"This hurts," he said to Jane wryly. "Look! You know all about those fields, and nobody but technicians for the company are supposed to know, and they're all men. You say you don't know who you are—but that doesn't bother you. And Hamlin was enormously excited when he saw you. I think it at least possible that his signaling was to tell the helicopters who you were, and the bombs were meant to kill you instead of me. Certainly he couldn't have told them anything about me that would have made them want to smash my laboratory before they'd looked it over! Would you mind telling me—"

"I ought to know about them," Jane said quietly. "I'm Jane Brent. Didn't you know? You guessed my first name right?"

"It fitted you," said Braddick. Then he stared, realizing. "You're supposed to be dead! You and your cousins were killed in an explosion, and the ownership of Atomic Power is tied up in the courts."

"We found out how the company was being run," she said, as quietly as before. "We decided to clean house. But a good many of the higher officials didn't want to lose their jobs and power, so—" She spread her hands, added bitterly; "I

wasn't killed. I woke up in what was supposed to be a small private insane asylum. Actually it was a prison for people Atomic Power found dangerous and didn't want or dare to kill.

"By the death of my cousins I actually have come to own control of the company. I imagine it was intended to let the court action drag out as long as possible and then produce me, by which time I'd have become—amenable. But something happened, and one of the prisoners escaped. They were afraid the place would be investigated. I was packed into a plane to be taken to some other place, and I managed to jump with a parachute. You know the rest."

Braddick considered, and slowly resumed his meal.

"Mmm—yes," he said reflectively. "They'd be hunting for you. But you were supposed to be dead, so if you had told me who you were I'd have thought you were crazy, and at least insisted on getting a doctor. You could have been kidnapped. Anyhow, I see why you were willing to stay in my lab. Even to work for me. It was the safest place—you thought."

"Wasn't it?" she demanded challengingly. "The instant you talked to me I knew"—she stopped, went on—"that I'd be all right with you."

He made a gesture around him.

"I've brought you out between the stars," he said drily. "But if I'm right nobody's particularly safe unless we can do something about those cosmoquakes. I guess it's all right. I shan't turn around and take you home anyhow."

She watched his face a moment, then spoke pleadingly.

"It won't make any difference, will it? I mean, that I'm rich?"

He grinned at her. "My dear! You're not rich if your employees' secret police get hold of you. They're a tough gang! And besides, just how much will Atomic Power be worth if the whole Solar System is smashed?"

She suddenly matched his grin.

"I went through the first cosmoquake

like everybody else," she told him, "but where I was kept, there wasn't much information on scientific matters. I've come along blind. I know what you've done, but not why. What are we aiming for? What are we to make contact with? And what causes cosmoquakes, anyhow? You never bothered to explain!"

HE BLINKED at her and then spoke gruffly.

"Thanks! I'll tell you. After the first cosmoquake, I got what data was to be had and figured that an object with a mass of twelve sols and a speed near that of light had passed about six hundred million miles from Earth. I figured its course. I thought there might be another one, but the first one could have been alone. There was a second one, and I was pretty sure there'd be a third. There is a third.

"The gravitometer in the lab said so. And the first was two weeks ahead of the second, but the third is only four days behind that. It looks like scouts and an advance guard. Considering their speed, they're close together. They're practically tripping over each other. Yet a small party wouldn't send one of its number even as far ahead as the first. They'd stay as close as they could, to help each other."

"But you talk as if they were—people!"

Braddick shrugged.

"I don't know what they are. But think! The Things have almost the speed of light. They come from the direction of Polaris, forty light years away. Empty space isn't altogether empty. There's at least one atom per cubic centimeter even between the stars. That means resistance to speeds close to light. Nothing can attain such speeds naturally. Whatever the Things are, they had to be driven to get going that fast, and the drive has to stay on to keep them going that fast.

"Their speed gives them the mass that raises hob, but they're spaceships.

They're artificial. They're going somewhere, and our Solar System is in the way. And we're going out to try to try to persuade them to change course."

"If there are more of them," Jane said slowly, "there'll be more cosmoquakes, and worse ones."

"So much worse," Braddick said measuredly, "that if we don't persuade them to change course, there's hardly any use in our going back to Earth. If there are dozens or hundreds of them to come, cosmoquakes will crack open geologic faults and let loose chains of giant volcanoes. The Thing that pass will raise tidal waves five miles high. Maybe the Sun itself will be stirred into exposition as a nova. It isn't impossible! In any case, the human race will be exterminated. So—well, if we don't persuade them to change course we might as well open the airlock door and step out."

Jane sat still an instant, imagining the tiny spaceship hanging in mid-space, alone surviving a Solar System gone mad, on which no planet would provide a foothold, and the nearest other star light years away.

Then there was a noise in the well which ran along the vertical axis of the ship. Hamlin and Thorn appeared. Somehow Hamlin had pulled himself together. But he looked like a man on the verge of the horrors. Thorn looked grave, with now a trace of reassured complacency.

"Look here, Braddick," said Hamlin, his voice pitched high, "this has gone far enough!"

"Yes?" said Braddick.

"You made an agreement with Atomic Power," said Hamlin. He gave an impression of breathlessness. "It was verbal, but it was recorded as it was made. You're an employee of the company for as long as Thorn is with you. I have written authority to take over any experiment you may be conducting while you are an employee of the company. I take over now! I insist that you stop this experiment at once! If we're really in space, I order you to return to

Earth!" He swallowed. "You're violating a contract. You've kidnaped Thorn and me. You—"

"Oh, damn!" said Braddick savagely. He pulled Hamlin's own flash pistol from his pocket. "Get in that room across the corridor! You're a fool, and I'll take no chances! *Move!* Both of you!"

"It's piracy!" protested Hamlin, his teeth chattering.

Thorn said condescendingly, "Mr. Braddick, you do not realize that Atomic Power is an important corporation! To be on the wrong side of the law, and opposed to Atomic Power—"

"*Move!*" repeated Braddick furiously.

THEY moved. Braddick jammed the door so it could not be opened from within. He nodded to Jane and climbed back to the control room. She followed.

"I could have said you're Atomic Power by rights," he grumbled, "but it's no use. I'm going to hook up a relay. I don't want to get too far out. I wish the ship had been finished."

The ship was actually incomplete, but the parts for its completion had been loaded in while the hull was building. Now he brought out an odd little inertia switch and adjusted it with minute care.

Then he cross-connected it to half a dozen of the switches on the control board. When that was finished, he set the drive control to a new point and threw off the main time field. The cosmos went back to a scene of twinkling lights and a new far distant Sun. But this time the sensation of weight was normal.

He leaned back in the control chair and seemed to relax. With the vision screens all about, the control room looked like a cage, with windows showing the sky all around. The Sun was now merely a bright star, and Earth was probably visible, but not easy to distinguish from vastly more distant stars which shone of their own light.

At sixty gravities, one attains a speed of twenty-three miles per second the first minute, and the speed increases by

twenty-three miles per second more for every added minutes. The spaceship was a long way from home.

"This switch won't be anywhere near as easy to trip as the gravitometer back in the lab," said Braddick. "But twelve sols is a lot of mass. If we trip it, our time field goes on to maximum, reducing our mass to as near zero as possible. Everything else goes off. I think—and I hope—we'll contact the Thing that's going on to make another cosmoquake. Meanwhile we can only wait. Maybe we'd better pray."

Jane asked quietly, "Do you really expect to do anything to an object weighing twelve times as much as the Sun?"

"It only weighs that because of its speed," said Braddick. He added with a shrug, "Things work out queerly. The odds against the time field being known when the first of those Things came by, against my having the hunch that made me do my calculations, against my having a machine that could make a spaceship, against your coming and being able to do what I wanted to do with the fields, against our escaping those bombs Atomic Power dropped on us—add those up, and they're pretty big odds. It's practically a miracle that we're here. And it would be pretty stupid of fate or chance or whatever to waste a good miracle like this by having us helpless at the end of it."

Jane looked at him, hard. Then she took a quick breath.

"I like that," she said softly. "I like this whole business. I like—everything!" She smiled at him gravely. "I say no more, or I might be unmaidenly."

The little spaceship went on through sheer emptiness with an attained speed of four-thousand-odd miles per second and no feeling of motion at all. It was accelerating slowly now, at one gravity, for comfort.

It was alone as no man-made object was ever alone before. It was far beyond escape velocity. If the drive failed, it would drift on forever through space. It was orphaned, abandoned by Sun and

Earth and planets. It went on and on and on.

Then the switch clicked over. There was an instant's sensation of bitter cold. Then the stars were gone, and there was a dark gray background to all of space. The ship's drive was off, and there was no feeling of weight at all. The sensation was of a giddy, terrible, endless fall.

"This," said Braddick, "is definitely it."

Jane was pale. "You mean—"

"We ran into a gravitational field," said Braddick. "There's only one thing with a gravitational field out here, and that's the Thing we came out to meet."

HE WATCHED the screens, holding himself in the control seat. The time field was on to its limit. Absolutely all the mass which could be taken out of any object had been removed. The time rate, correspondingly, had gone up. The spaceship might have weighed eighty tons or so on Earth.

In this time rate, its mass would have been measurable only in milligrams—and there are three hundred-odd milligrams in an aspirin tablet. In this field, too, time was telescoped to an incredible degree. Not only was visible light too low in frequency to affect the scanners, but X-rays and even cosmics were too far in the red to register.

Gravity itself had the effect of light, and the tenuous gravitational fields which interlace all space made a faint grayish glow. The stars were lost against this background. The Sun, to be sure, was a visible speck of lighter gray.

But far away yet growing nearer with a perceptible speed even at this time rate, there was another and vastly brighter object. Beyond it were others. Small pinpoints of brightness, remote, in ordered and patently artificial arrangement. They looked like a new constellation, precisely geometric in design. But they were, of course, the space fleet of Things, moving toward some unguessable destination, with Earth and Sol and the Solar System merely a

course marker, like an ant heap in the desert between the stars.

The little spaceship was practically without inertia, practically without resistance to gravitational pull. It fell headlong toward the Thing from beyond Polaris, the fellow to the Things which had shaken the Earth and roused the Sun to fury. It glowed more and more brightly as the spaceship approached. The scanners adjusted to cut down its glare.

The little spaceship swung past and fell into an orbit about it. The Thing was perhaps a thousand feet long, no more. It glowed with the fierce energy of its mass. There were rows of openings along its hull. They might have been ports, or they might have been weapons. And it had the mass of twelve suns.

VII

FOR five hours, as time passed in the master field, the little spaceship from Earth swung about the giant, glowing Thing. On Earth, in the same interval, only the infinitesimal fraction of a second passed.

Those in the spaceship lived at such a rate that had they stayed in their orbit until they died of old age, a child's punctured bubble on Earth would not have vanished. But they spent five seeming hours in telescoped time, and despite the lack of weight they were able to work and to know futility.

The two in the control room looked at each other, at last, with defeat in their eyes. They had tied themselves in their seats. In its established orbit, everything in the spaceship seemed weightless.

Despite the Thing's mass, their revolution about its neutralized all attraction. But their speed in that orbit was actually so enormous that the Thing itself seemed to revolve slowly even in their time rate.

"The situation seems to call for another miracle, Jane," said Braddick, try-

ing to smile. "We can't attract attention, even unfavorably. And the Thing itself is invulnerable. At a speed so close to that of light, its every molecule has a mass of tons. No explosive we know could dent it. If it rammed a planet the size of Earth, it wouldn't be stopped. It would go right on through. But the planet would explode after it had passed."

Jane watched his face, her hands folded together demurely.

"There are creatures of some sort inside it," said Braddick. "They may be fiends, or they may be quite decent. We're like ants to them, but maybe they wouldn't deliberately kill us. Yet they'll never know we were here, because—now that I realize it—they're in a time field too.

"Einstein figured it out more than seventy years ago. When an object approaches the speed of light and its mass increases, its time rate slows in proportion. With every molecule weighing tons, the creatures who built this thing—whatever they are—must move with infinite slowness and feel quite normal regardless. It's a penalty they pay for their invulnerability. But we'll never be able to make them know we're here."

Jane's eyes remained fixed on his face. Braddick looked suddenly old and worn. The tiny spaceship now circled the Thing from outer space as a moth circles a flame. It could do nothing—literally nothing.

Its weight was infinitesimal, but the power of its drive was proportional to its mass. It simply could not pull away from a gravitational field equal to twelve suns. And it looked now as if the tiny ship would simply remain as a satellite of the Thing until—

"One more item," said Braddick. "Revolving around the Thing as we are, we have a terrific velocity ourselves. We'd go into the Thing's own time rate if we cut off our main field. But I pointed out before, that there's matter even in supposedly empty space. An atom to the cubic centimeter. At our speed, we're

batting into trillions of them every second. Even the Things need to keep their drives on to keep from being slowed by that normally immeasurable resistance. But our mass is so slight that we're slowing down fast. The more slowly we move, the closer we come to the Thing. We're closer now than we were. Before many hours we're going to touch it—and die."

Jane glanced at the vision screens and back at him.

"But the—creatures must know about the slowing of time at their velocity," she said hesitantly.

"I'd think so," said Braddick.

"And this is one of the scouts," said Jane. "We saw"—she pointed to the geometric pattern of glowing points on the vision screen—"we can see the rest of the fleet. This one is on ahead, like the ones that made cosmoquakes."

Braddick nodded. "Yes."

"Why would they have scouts," asked Jane, "if their scouts live so slowly that they couldn't signal a danger until it was long past? The odds against any solar system having a weapon that will destroy them must be enormous, but they thought it possible or they wouldn't have sent scouts on ahead."

BRADDICK'S forehead creased.

"Yes, I see." Then his expression of defeat lightened. "Of course! They'd have to have automatic signals! Signals that would be sent back from a scout that was attacked, whether the creatures in it realized the attack or not. Of course!"

He straightened within the cord that held him in his seat.

"The kick-back, though," he said drily, "is that if they have a device that will signal the fleet that this ship is attacked, it will almost certainly turn on some defenses for this ship. And they ought to be deadly. They should blow us out of space in a hurry. If we can start them, we'll be spending our lives simply to send a signal that may not have any effect at all."

Jane smiled at him. "But aren't we dead already, Dirk?"

He nodded. "We are. All right! We try to attack the Thing. But we've no projectiles that would stir the top layer of molecules. Hmm . . . What would be long radio waves to us would be visible light to them. Now, if we could start some sort of trigger wave, to start radio-activity—" He added, "I'm stabbing in the dark, but there might be something there."

He began to scribble on a pad beside him. He seemed to forget the girl at his elbow. But Jane watched him with a curiously maternal expression. She regarded him like someone watching a little boy of whom she is vastly proud, but whom she knows needs someone to look after him. . . .

Far off in space, the mighty armada of the Things bored on. There were thousands of them. It was, perhaps, the mass migration of an entire race, leaving the planets of a burned-out sun for younger worlds discovered by its explorers in the course of a search-requiring millenia.

In the Things would be stored all the equipment for defense and attack that hundreds of thousands of years of their civilization had developed. There would be mighty machines and equipment for the reconstruction of a world. The space armada may have been a gallant defiance of fate by an ancient people whose sun had burned low and who had to start anew or die.

But in its path lay Earth. And on Earth was a young civilization. Atomic Power had been known for less than half a century. Broadcast power was not yet in universal use. Clumsy, laboring rockets had barely circled its Moon. Only twice had explorers returned from a satellite hardly a quarter-million miles away.

Its science was childish by comparison with that which had built the Things. And Earth was doomed. The human race was destined for annihilation when the navy of Things merely

drove past.

The second cosmoquake had killed millions. But also it had shaken terrestrial scientists out of their complacency. The second cosmoquake had rescued Dirk Braddick's explanation from the daily paper feature pages and caused it to be given really serious consideration.

Physics laboratories—those that survived—hastily prepared devices to test its accuracy. Gravitometers even more delicate than Braddick's had been made, and they verified his explanation to the full.

A full hour before the bombing of his laboratory, other scientists knew of the third nearing Thing. More, they had detected the more distant main fleet. But then they could not reach Dirk Braddick. For three days his laboratory had been isolated.

But on the fourth day Air-Navy helicopters descended and found it in still-smoking ruins. But some of them followed and shot down private fliers who tried to flee, and learned that Atomic Power had bombed and killed—apparently—the man who alone had understood the cosmoquakes from the beginning and was surely the only man who might have devised a defense. . . .

IN THE spaceship Braddick looked up in renewed, dull defeat.

"No use," he said heavily. "I figured out a frequency that would do the work. A radio wave, a disintegration-frequency that would start radioactivity at work like a lightning fast cancer. It would eat up that Thing in seconds. It could only be generated in a ship in our time field, and only work on matter in the time rate yonder. But there's one flaw in it. It's useless."

"You'll make it work!" Jane said confidently.

"No," said Braddick. "I could make a generator. But it has to shift electrons in the Thing to start its destruction. I began to figure on the power I'd need. And it worked out beautifully until I remembered that at the speed that thing

has attained, its electrons weigh pounds.

"Pounds, my dear Jane! And it would take more energy than Atomic Power makes in all its generating stations to pack power enough into a beam to move those outsize electrons. And we simply haven't got it."

There was silence. Then Jane put out her hand and touched his shoulder comfortingly.

"Well, then," she said in a sort of blind confidence, "you'll think of something else!"

He automatically covered her hand with his own. But he spoke querulously.

"Darn it, Jane, I don't like it! I know there's some way to beat the thing! I know it, but—"

All of the lights in the control room went out. The vision screens went dead. The control room became inky black. The air purifier had been running. Its noise was a faint murmur. It cut off as the lights did. The stillness was enough to crack the eardrums. The blackness was absolute.

Jane spoke in a shaking voice.

"Dirk! What—"

"I don't know," Braddick said evenly. "Maybe the Thing has defenses that turn on, after all. Or perhaps—" He said vexedly, "It might be merely a line failure, and I haven't a flashlight on the ship. I simply didn't think to bring one!"

Of the two possibilities, the one seemed as likely as the other.

"I'll check the wiring in the dark," said Braddick. He got up fumblingly because of his lack of weight. "Better take my place at the control board. Not that it'll do any good if—"

He touched her in the inky blackness. And they were weightless, in a tiny bomb of blackness on the vast vacuum of interstellar space. Knowledge of the monstrous vacancy outside made for a feeling of aching loneliness.

The crytic, monstrous Thing which held them captive was frightening in its impassive deadliness. And the nagging certainty of death ahead caused a sharp

urgency in all their emotions.

They touched in the blackness. And Braddick, as if moved by an irresistible force, reached out and drew her to him. Her hands reached about his neck.

Soft lips pressed his.

An instant later, he said unsteadily, "I didn't mean to do that! Not yet! But I'm glad I did! Now I'm going to work out something."

Jane spoke softly, in the absolute obscurity.

"Even if you don't, it doesn't matter so much now! But I'd have hated to die without your kissing me."

"I'll be back in a minute," said Braddick. "I'll check the switches first, then try to trace the circuits." He made a sudden, inarticulate sound. "I've got it!" he said fiercely. "By all that's holy, I know what to do!"

Then there was a scrambling noise. He was pulling himself down the ladder in what had been the corridor.

He went down, floating without weight and holding to the ladder as a guide. He tried to remember to count the rungs, even while his mind raced in estimate of the possibilities in his new idea.

But they would be possibilities only if this was a failure in the spaceship, not a defensive field which prevented all power from functioning so near the Thing.

He grimaced in the blackness. And then, suddenly, clutching fingers grabbed him, and two bodies assailed him. He fought savagely, weightless and almost helpless because of lack of weight. He struck out hard, hit soft flesh, and the violence of his own blow threw him backward. His head hit something.

VIII

BRADDICK came back to consciousness floating eerily in mid-air. The lights were on again. Hamlin floated close beside him, holding lightly to a ladder rung with one hand, gripping his

recovered flash pistol in the other. He looked righteously triumphant.

"You try to start something, Mr. Braddick," he said severely, "and I'm going to shoot! Thorn will testify in court for me, and he's going to fix the machinery so it will take us back. I've got a legal right to defend myself. Atomic Power—"

Thorn's head and shoulders came out of the drive room opening. He looked confused, like someone trying to feel complacent and worried at the same time. He decided upon worry.

"Mr. Hamlin," he said plaintively, "he's changed the leads of the power units! There's two new leads I don't understand. I don't know what'll happen if I do anything. It's the drive I'm talking about, and he's got 'em fixed some new way, so I don't know what'll happen if I fix them like they ought to be!"

Hamlin looked uneasily at Braddick, and back at Thorn. Then he spoke irritably.

"Go on and figure it out! Figure what he did and what it does! If you want a bigger job with the company—"

Thorn shook his head stubbornly. "I know how those units ought to be connected. They aren't connected that way. They work some way I don't understand. I've been trained to do things the right way, not understand how wrong ways work. I'm not going to touch it, Mr. Hamlin. It's against company rules."

Hamlin protested furiously but he was uneasy himself. Braddick remained silent. Floating as he was, he saw Jane's face peering down from the control room. She made a quick gesture. He gave no sign, except that his eyes followed her as he drifted.

"Come on down here, Thorn," said Hamlin at last, angrily. "We'll tie Braddick up. We'll tie that girl up. Then we'll talk it over."

Thorn obediently climbed out into the well which had been a corridor. He came clumsily down the shaft. Braddick floated aimlessly in midair. Now his feet

were toward the bow of the ship, and now his head. He knew that Jane was watching.

There was a sudden, terrific jerk. The three of them, floating free, fell toward the stern of the ship. But Braddick fell feet first. The others hit, Thorn head first, Hamlin any how. Thorn was knocked cold, and Hamlin dissolved into quivering panic which made him helpless. Braddick staggered as he landed, then sprang upon Hamlin, snatching the flash-pistol and struck savagely with its barrel.

"All right Jane!" he said shortly. "Turn off the drive now."

He bundled the two limp forms into another compartment and jammed the door as before. Then he went up.

"They worked their door loose and cut off the power" he said drily. "Luckily, not the time field. I'm glad they did. You cut in the drive, and it all leads to—this."

He kissed her soundly.

"Now listen!" he commanded. "I told you I'd thought of a trick we can try. You're not going to like it, but you've got to help. Here's the idea."

He told her. She went white, but she nodded soberly. Ten minutes later—ship time—he was clad in a pressure suit designed for use in planes at high altitudes. It was made of a plastic fabric, with a helmet and a tank of oxygen. It was not designed for use in space, but the pressure difference would hardly matter.

He went into the airlock with a huge coil of fine wire, pushing it before him in midair. He closed the inner door. He did not wait to pump the lock empty, but opened the outer door after a first heave at it had cracked it enough to let most of the air in the lock escape to space.

Then he looked out into the strange, improbable gray emptiness which was the cosmos at maximum time rate. The glowing Thing seemed only a little below him. Actually, it was probably no more than two hundred feet away—it had

been much farther at the beginning of their circling. He fed the thin bare wire steadily out into space.

IT WENT beyond the time field," but it did not lose its flexibility. Its mass had been removed. It would remain in its acquired time rate forever unless another time field restored it to normal for its surroundings. It flowed out and out and out, astern. It had the orbital speed of the spaceship itself, and now Jane put on an infinitesimal trace of drive.

The wire trailed behind as a thin and shining thread. As the spaceship circled the Thing the wire formed a ring. Presently, so closely had Jane guided the ship, the circle was complete.

The trailing end came back into view beyond the airlock door. Braddick reached out with a hooked length of wire and hauled it in again. He closed the airlock door and let air into the narrow space. He reentered the ship and stripped off the pressure suit.

The little spaceship had ringed the monster Thing with a thin thread of wire forming a perfect circle in empty space. It revolved about the giant object like one of the rings of Saturn. Braddick took the controls.

"Now it's up to you, Jane."

As she left the seat, Jane's face worked a little. She kissed him and fled to the drive room. She came out with two flexible wires which she connected to the two ends of the bare wire which now circled the Thing. She came back.

"I put it on the switch you told me to," she said shakily. "I want to be with you if—anything happens."

"Right," said Braddick.

He put his arm about her firmly. They watched the vision screens. Braddick waited a breathtaking length of time. Then his hand quite steady, he threw the switch. There was an odd, harsh sensation as if someone had plucked the very heartstrings of the universe. As if something under tension had given way, and there was ease after it. And then—

The small spaceship floated alone in space with a suddenly collapsed ring of bare copper wire behind it. The Thing had vanished. It simply wasn't there any more.

They went into normal time to orient themselves. Braddick had chosen the moment for closing the switch when the spaceship's position in its orbit was right. The little plastic vessel had been in the part of its orbit when it moved away from the Sun.

When the Thing vanished, the little ship was thrown backward. Much of its sunward velocity, then, was canceled. But Sol was a very bright star and it was necessary to decelerate violently to keep from being carried on past by the speed the Thing had imparted with its monstrous mass.

For hours on end in time field the drive worked valorously to neutralize the little ship's imposed speed. Braddick took time out to descend and seal the door of Thorn and Hamlin's cubbyhole prison. He cut a hole in the door for ventilation.

Hamlin grew frantic to the point of incoherence, threatening all the penalties of the law and of Atomic Power's secret police. Thorn became haughty, shaking his head deprecatingly at Braddick for the predicament he was in, having defied Atomic Power.

But when Braddick landed in Washington, it did not quite work out that way. To begin with, he had an obvious spaceship. What he had to say was partly proved by that fact alone. And he was mildly astonished to learn that his explanation of the two cosmoquakes was now accepted scientific doctrine, and that the danger, as well as the existence of the Things had been proved.

In fact, a third cosmoquake had begun its first phase and was being watched with sickened apprehension by every physicist on Earth, when it had abruptly ceased.

Instruments had showed that a body with a mass of twelve sols was moving toward the Solar System.

LONGER AND more accurate observation had proved that it would pass within twenty million miles of Earth. The human race would be exterminated. But then, when the first physical symptoms were evident, the cause vanished.

Braddick could explain the disappearance of the Thing. He did.

"It was a spaceship from somewhere beyond Polaris," he said briefly. "It had to keep its drive on because at such speeds there's resistance even in space. So I managed to get a wire around it for the field coil of a mass time field. When I turned on the field, apparently I didn't make all of it massless, but I evidently neutralized a good deal of mass and speeded up the time rate in its engine room—and consequently its drive, which began to operate at probably millions of times its normal rate. The Thing had lost part of its weight, but its drive went up astronomically. So my guess is that it went up beyond the speed of light and turned up in some other set of dimensions."

Somebody spoke instinctively.

"But that's impossible!"

"So are cosmoquakes," said Braddick, "and spaceships, and . . . Oh, fudge!"

"I mean," objected his listener, "energy itself has mass. There were thousands, millions of tons of energy stored in the spaceship in the form of the mass it had added by its speed. What did you do with all that energy?"

"My guess," said Braddick, "is that —" Then he shrugged. "I'll write a paper about it some time. Right now I've got to pass on the plans for more ships like the one I've got. Maybe some more can be made before the main fleet gets here. Anyhow I'm going to pass out what information I have, load up this ship again, and start to slash at the main fleet of the Things. And I want to get married."

Jane flushed. But she spoke composedly.

"Yes. And I am Jane Brent, and I want to do something about the officials of Atomic Power, because I think I own

control of that company now."

Then there was confusion. But Atomic Power was not in good odor any more, as Hamlin and Thorn found out when they were released. Even its influence could not stand against the authority of government and the decisive insistence of its principal stockholder that something be done at once to stop its private police force and its private prisons and the murders that had been committed in its name.

But it was something over a day later that the really big news came. The delicate, sensitive gravitometric instruments which had already detected the existence of the space fleet of Things and their approach, now gave good news.

The Thing fleet had split into two, and was widely separated. The breach was widening hour by hour. The Things had used Sol as a course marker. Anticipating no combat, nevertheless scouts and advance guards had been sent on ahead.

The first scouts had gone on through. But one of the advance guards had vanished in the fraction of a second, evidently as the result of an attack by inhabitants of the Solar System.

The Things were not seeking conquest. They separated into two fleets, which now would straddle Sol's family, passing billions and trillions of miles out from the Sun where even their incredible combined mass could do no damage and would not further irritate the population of so belligerent a planetary group.

DIRK BRADDICK was definitely a hero, and Jane was hardly less admired for the way in which she cleaned up the corporation she had inherited. She turned Braddick's two bartered inventions back to him, though, and canceled the agreement which would have made the space drive Atomic Power property.

"It doesn't make any difference," he said impatiently "People want me to develop it! They want to make a corporation for interplanetary exploration and trade. You handle it, Jane. I've got some research I want to do."

"What sort of research?" Jane asked, interestedly.

"That gravity business," said Braddick restlessly. "The fleet must have been a light week away from Earth, at least. But in two days it had found out its scout had vanished, and changed course, and we knew it. How the devil could that happen? Does gravity travel faster than light?"

"Darling," said Jane, "we're still on our honeymoon. Don't you think you'd better do a little more research on how nice it is to be married to me, before you get back to that sort of thing?"

Braddick looked at her suspiciously. Then he grinned.

"Oh, all right! We'll go out right now and look at the Moon and see what discoveries we make."

Their discoveries were neither new nor unprecedented, but they seemed to be satisfactory.



Coming in the Next Issue!

ATOMIC, a powerful novelet by **HENRY KUTTNER**



"Be not afraid," the Queen murmured, "You will not be harmed"

Swing Your Lady

By KELVIN KENT

When the Amazons of Ancient Greece started chasing Pete Manx, they were in for a shock—electrical, no less!

PETE MANX was in the worst spot of his eventful life. Not even the splendor of his costume had power to lift his drooping spirits. And that showed pretty well how sunk Manx felt.

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He fingered the carnation in the lapel of his cutaway and grimaced miserably. Then he craned his neck to look out the back window of the taxi. No sign of pursuit. Only upper Broadway, sweltering under an Indian summer sun.

He reflected, I been run out of Cowper, Kansas, for selling patent medicine, and that circus riot in Elk's Tooth wasn't no bed of roses. But I never came up against a dame like Margie before. Oh, gosh! Wish I was dead. What a life. Maybe she's trailing me now.

Pete Manx shuddered convulsively. If there was only some place to hide!

"Yipe!" said Mr. Manx aloud, and bent forward as though he had been kicked in the stomach. "Doc Mayhem! That's it . . . Hey, I don't want to go to the East River. Changed my mind. Uptown, and fast!"

He gave the driver an address.

Ten minutes later he burst into the home-and-laboratory of Dr. Mayhem, wide-eyed and disheveled.

"Doc!" he yowled. "Hey! I need help, but quick. Where are you?"

A burly, red-faced man with a paunch and the expression of an embittered gorilla appeared, puffing at a cigar and staring. "Pete? Mayhem isn't here. He'll be back pretty soon."

Pete Manx scowled at Professor Aker, who was an old enemy of his. Then he jumped nervously as an automobile horn blew in the street outside.

"I can't wait," he chattered. "That dame may come after me with an ax. Prof, you know how to work the Doc's time machine, don't you?"

Aker nodded. "Of course."

"Then you gotta use it on me. I need a hideout. And right now."

A hopeful gleam came into the scientist's eye. "Trouble with the police? Arson? Murder?"

"Lay off," Pete Manx muttered. "I ain't in any mood for gags. Look at me. What do you see?"

"A low-grade moron," Aker began, but he was interrupted.

"These duds," Manx explained. "Cut-

away, carnation, silk topper. Margie made me put 'em on. They're for the wedding."

"Wedding?"

"I tell you, that dame had me enchanted. I met up with her at Coney. She's a snake charmer. First thing I knew, she started treating me as if I was one of her snakes. The strength on that frill!" Pete Manx shivered.

AKER WAS grinning. "Go on."

"I dunno how I got into this scrape, anyhow. I took her out once or twice and then she decides we'll get married. Ugh, the way she looks at a guy! Like needles. She figures we'll be married and I'll spiel for her act." Pete Manx laughed hollowly.

The professor seemed amused. "Why not tell her no?"

"Look," said Mr. Manx, "let's say you're in a cage with Gargantua, or maybe a giant python. Talking don't do much good. All you can do is run like blazes. And Margie's got detectives trailing me. I tried to skip out four times, and the last time she talked to me—" Manx gulped. "You never been talked to by a snake charmer with gimlets for eyes and a couple of baby boas twined around her neck. I argued. I begged. I said I'd make a punk husband. 'I'll mold you into shape,' she says. And today's the wedding."

Aker was chuckling. "I'll be your best man, if you like."

"Why don't the Doc come back?" Mr. Manx groaned. "Margie's been trailing me all day. First thing I know, she'll come busting in and drag me off to the parson."

"I don't see how you can get out of it."

"Well, I do. She can't marry me if I'm not here. I want the Doc to let me use his time machine. Then when Margie gets here, she'll think I'm a stiff. You know how the gadget works."

"Of course," said Aker, seeing a chance to get off a lecture. "It releases the ego from the body and sends it back to the Central Time Consciousness, the

hub of the time-wheel. Then centrifugal force shoots the *id* to another era, where it inhabits the body of someone who was alive at that time. The—"

"Oh-oh!" said Pete. "Here she is. In a taxi. With her snakes, too. Omigosh! I'm sunk." He began to chew the carnation in hopeless frenzy.

Aker came to a sudden decision. "I'll fix it, Pete. I know how to use the time machine. Come along."

"Y-you will?" Pete Manx sounded incredulous. "Prof, you ain't quite the heel I thought. But we gotta work fast." He shot into the laboratory like a torpedo and esconced himself in a wired metal chair in one corner. "Shoot the works!"

Aker was hurriedly manipulating switches and dials. "It won't take long. And I'll get rid of Margie."

"That's your story," Pete Manx remarked, bouncing up and down in the chair. "You don't know Margie. That dame'd follow me to Frisco and drag me back by the ears. But she can't follow me where I'm going. Make it a nice safe time, Prof. I don't want to meet up with Lucrezia Borgia again—or Merlin!"

There was a gleam of wicked amusement in Aker's eyes. Pete Manx saw it too late. The professor chuckled. "You'll have a rest cure where you're going. Besides, I've always wondered how much truth there was in the legends of the—"

He knifed a switch.

"—the Amazons."

Swosh!

There was a crackle of electricity as the time-circuit closed. Pete Manx stiffened momentarily; then he fell back in the chair, jaw dropping. He resembled a corpse.

Aker was laughing like mad.

Pete Manx's ego shot away with a whizz, caromed off a stray century, arced toward Greece, and came to rest in the body of a small, meek-looking little man who was desperately trying to remove somebody's sandaled foot from his face.

Confusion reigned. It was extremely hot, and there was a great deal of yelling going on, together with a metallic clank-

ing that puzzled Pete Manx a great deal. Also, he smelled blood.

With some difficulty, he removed the foot from his face and heaved at the heavy weight that was bearing him down. Finally his head popped into view. Apparently he had been buried under a pile of—*ulp*—corpses.

They wore armor, and were all indeed dead. Other mounds and individual stiffs lay here and there on the broad plain. A battle was just ending. Men on horses were hightailing it frantically, fleeing from their successful attackers. There was something decidedly odd about the victors of the battle. Not even armor could disguise their feminine figures.

A horse cantered by, and Pete Manx automatically captured it. He was in a backwash of the battle, and nobody noticed him, for the nonce. Should he mount and flee? But where?

The problem was solved for him by the approach of a burly, red-bearded man who crawled out from beneath a bush.

"You are indeed a faithful orderly," he informed Manx. "I am sorry I beat you for failing to polish my sword this morning. Well, if we meet again, I shall be kinder."

With that, he leaped astride the horse, drove spurs deep, and galloped away, leaving Manx with one arm extended in futile protest.

Orderly, eh? Well, at any rate, he now knew what side he was on—the wrong side. Since there were no more horses in evidence except, Pete Manx thought with ill-timed and atrocious humor, the ones that were *hors de combat*. It would be well to hide. With this in mind, he dived for the nearest pile of corpses.

Hoofs clattered. "Ha, dog!" said a shrill, impassioned voice, and the point of a spear pricked the only visible portion of Pete Manx. "Now you die with your comrades."

"Guk!" Manx cried incoherently, writhing aside to meet the cold blue stare of an Amazon woman astride her battle charger. "Hold everything! I ain't in this."

"Aye, hold," a new voice broke in, deeper and more commanding. "He is no warrior, Clio, by his trappings. 'Twere shame to slay a mere slave."

"As you like, Thecla," Clio grunted.

Pete Manx saw, with a sudden shock of horror, that the blue-eyed, dark-haired Amazon bore a strong resemblance to Margie. There were, however, no snakes, but Clio's muscles were enough to make anyone shudder.

Thecla was no weakling, either, but she was better proportioned. She was a big, brawny, red-haired wench, with cat-like green eyes and a snub nose. Now she was eying Pete with an interest that boded the man no good.

"The battle's over," she remarked. "Those marauding Greeks won't trouble us again for awhile. Take this prize of the war back to my tent, Clio. He is passing fair."

Pete Manx reddened to the roots of his hair. "Now listen!" he objected hotly. "I got some rights."

Clio interrupted him. She picked him up by the back of his tunic and flung him across her saddle. Pete Manx writhed and yelled in futile resentment.

He quieted suddenly when the point of a dagger dug into his spine.

"Men should know their places," Clio said, "and keep to them. One more move from you and I'll drag you behind my horse."

"Don't harm him," Thecla urged. "That would be sad to mar his sweet young face."

Pete Manx nearly fainted with horror. This could not be happening to him! Out of the frying-pan with a vengeance!

Thecla galloped away. With an annoyed grunt, Clio cantered in the opposite direction, muttering, "The Queen's too kind to her men. The best way is to beat them and often. Hold still, you miserable little worm, or I'll take pleasure in stepping on you. Hah!"

"B-but—" Pete Manx gurgled.

"Silence!" The dagger drove deeper into his spine.

Mr. Manx said no more.

THE CAMP of the Amazons lay in a broad valley, near a good-sized stream bordered by groves of olive and oak. It seemed to be a semi-permanent encampment, a base established to guard the frontiers. Queen Thecla, ruler of all the Amazons, divided her time between the main city, far to the north, and such outposts as this.

The scene was idyllic. The gaily-colored pavilions were bright against the green meadows, and the blue sky of Greece was a canopy overhead. It reflected with sparkles of sunshine in the huge tub in which the unfortunate Pete Manx was washing clothes.

He reflected bitterly, a fine thing! Wish I had a bottle of my old Manx Cleansall. Hah.

The soap was not the best quality, and Manx was forced to use a good deal of elbow grease. Ruefully he contemplated his reddened knuckles.

"It ain't fair," he growled. "Damn Professor Aker, anyway. I hope Margie stuffed one of her snakes down his throat. Well, at least I'm still a bachelor."

"Not for long," said a cold voice. It was Clio, swaggering toward him, her hard blue eyes unpleasantly malicious. "Queen Thecla will wed you as soon as she's back. And that will be soon. Come along. She won't be pleased to find you at this task. But you'll get a meaner one if you try to escape again."

"I just wanted to take a walk," Mr. Manx explained, not hopefully. The brawny Amazon grinned and touched her dagger-hilt.

"By Artemis, you'd best not wander far from camp. Our archers have sharp arrows. Come."

Pete Manx was only too glad to relinquish his messy task. He changed his mind, however, when he found himself in one of the pavilions, attended by several masculine slaves armed with strigils, ointments, combs, brushes and perfumes. Manx felt like a Pekingese the day before a dog-show.

"Hey!" he objected passionately.

"Don't smear that goo on me. It smells."

"'Tis myrrh," said one of the slaves.

"The Queen likes its scent."

"Well, I don't!" yelled Mr. Manx and retreated into a corner of the tent. "A little after-shave lotion is my speed. But that's all."

Hearing the commotion, Clio appeared, looking annoyed.

"What's wrong here? . . . What? Oh, he doesn't, eh?" She drew her dagger and moved cat-footed toward the worried Mr. Manx. "There's no time to waste. Thecla will be here soon, and you must be ready for her."

She spoke further and profanely to Pete Manx, reminding him of an army top-kick he once knew. Presently the slaves continued their work, while Clio went outside with a final threat.

Pete Manx writhed. Yet he knew it was wisest to play along, for the while, till he got at least a small break. So his beard was combed and curled luxuriantly, odorous perfumes smeared on him, and his hair anointed with the Grecian equivalent of bear-grease. Eventually he staggered to a couch of furs and collapsed, moaning faintly. He had just looked in a mirror.

"I ain't neat," he murmured.

"You will please the Queen," said one of the slaves, a meek little man with shifty eyes and a flat dish-face. "That is always wise, Zeno."

"Zeno?" Pete Manx looked up. "My name's—uh—Petros Mancos." He employed an alias he had used before in the past.

The other smiled furtively. "You do not remember, me—Antigonus? But it is wise of you to use a false name, Zeno. If your real one were known here, you would be tortured to death."

Pete Manx swallowed. "I expected this," he said, glaring bitterly at nothing. "Everything happens to me. I'm allergic to trouble. So I'm in the body of a guy named Zeno, and he's a public enemy." He gripped Antigonus' arm. "Now look, pal. Ever heard of amnesia?"

"No," said the other. "Who is she?"

PETE MANX explained. "So there it is," he ended. "I got a bump on the head and now I can't remember anything. See? I gotta know the set-up."

Antigonus glanced around at the other slaves, who were watching interestedly. "They won't betray you. Well, years ago you and I were in a distant Amazon camp, far to the west, both of us slaves. You're sure you don't remember? Well, we belonged to a warrior-woman named Urganilla, called the Bear-Wrestler."

"Ulp," Pete remarked. "G-go on."

"You betrayed that camp to the Greeks. Only a few escaped, Urganilla among them. She, I think, is the only Amazon who would recognize you. And if she does, of course, you will be torn to bits."

Antigonus ended reflectively, "Or perhaps sliced at with swords. I'm not quite sure."

"Where is this Bear-Wrestler?"

"In the city. But she's due in camp in a day or so. When she arrives, you will die, I suppose. It is sad."

"Sad!" Pete Manx gulped. "I got tears in my eyes already. Look, Antigonus, I gotta get out of here, double quick."

"You can't. The guards are always on the alert. It is impossible to escape from the camp."

Manx shut his eyes and thought hard. Obviously he was in a spot. But he had been in trouble before, and his resources had not failed him. Despite their muscles and weapons, these Amazons did not seem especially bright. Perhaps he could outwit them and escape.

Where? Manx wasn't sure. But, after questioning Antigonus further, he realized that to remain in the camp till Urganilla arrived would be fatal. For the Amazon would recognize him and immediately denounce him as a traitor.

After that—ugh!

His reverie was interrupted by the arrival of Queen Thecla. The red-haired Amazon strode into the tent, chin arrogantly lifted, and her gaze found Manx.

"Ah," she said. "You are more beautiful than I had thought."

Manx looked desperate.

"Now look," he said. "I ain't beautiful."

"Be not afraid," the Queen murmured. "You will not be harmed. Now I must go. There are reports to be dictated, and plans to be made. Later we must have a friendly talk." With that she departed, leaving Pete Manx to claw at his curled beard.

"She likes you." Antigonus smiled suggestively.

"Shut up!" howled Mr. Manx, crimson with futile fury. "I'm no lap-dog. I'm no gigolo. I'm getting out of here right now!"

It was, however, easier said than done. Antigonus and the other slaves were friendly enough, and willing to help, so long as they were not involved in trouble. At nightfall Pete Manx slipped away through an olive grove and headed for the hills.

Some time later he came back, unwillingly, across the back of a horse ridden by an Amazon guard. Queen Thecla was considerate, but firm. She lectured Manx on the uselessness of attempting escape, and told him that the next time it happened, he would be whipped soundly. Then she patted the miserable man's cheek, gave him a sweetmeat, and sent him back to the other slaves, chattering inarticulately.

"I told you so," Antigonus said helpfully.

Pete Manx barked sharply and went off to brood in a corner. After awhile he got an idea. He came back to the group of slaves.

"Look," he said, "I saw a movie once about Amazons—"

"Movie?"

"Let it lay. I got a hunch. How'd you boys like to get the upper hand on these Amazons?" He explained at length. His words were greeted with surprisingly little enthusiasm.

"But we like it this way," Antigonus objected. "We don't work hard, we don't have to fight or run risks, and we get plenty to eat."

WELL, OBVIOUSLY only the weakest specimens of the Greeks were ever captured by Amazons. The strong ones either died in battle, or escaped to fight again.

"Where's your self-respect?" Mr. Manx said sharply. "Woman's place is in the home. Equal rights for everybody, that's what we want. Why should men have to do all the drudgery? Now listen —"

He was a persuasive talker. He pointed out the advantage of conquering the Amazons.

"Conquering them?"

"Peacefully. Propaganda, that's the stuff. Passive resistance. Equal rights. A man oughta be the master in his own tent."

He talked on, smoothly and convincingly. There was no point in explaining all his plans, of course. Equal rights would not be enough. What Pete Manx was working for was a complete reversal of the Amazonian social scheme. Men, not women, must be the masters.

It could be done. Pete Manx had read stories, and seen a film or two, that dealt with exactly the same subject. A guy was captured by the Amazons, got busy, and pretty soon the apple-cart was upset, and the women were doing the washing. That was what Pete Manx wanted. It was the only way he could save his own life.

If the Amazons were still in charge when Urganilla arrived and denounced him, it would be just too bad. But if the women were powerless, the men in charge, he would be safe.

It looked like the long way around; yet it was the only way. For by this time Manx was convinced of the impossibility of escape. His job was to persuade the slaves to help him.

"We'll be whipped," Antigonus objected.

"Not if we play smart. I got some tricks up my sleeve that ought to help. If we get the Amazons worried enough, the war's half won. Boring from within, see?"

"No," said Antigonus.

Pete Manx made a large gesture. "Just leave it to me." He was not too pleased with his companions. They did not seem to have enough backbone. But he had to use the tools that lay ready to his hand. "I'll try psychology. The Amazons are plenty superstitious. Suppose their goddess—"

"Artemis?"

"Yeah, Artemis. Suppose she says that men have to be the masters, and puts a curse on the Amazons till the change is made?"

Antigonus blinked. "One cannot make a goddess speak."

Pete Manx smiled happily. "Wait and see. She's the moon goddess, eh? Well, maybe I can make a moon—"

He brooded briefly over storage batteries, electric lights, and a public-address system.

Pretty complicated, but he would try what he could.

"We'll want some signs painted. Now listen."

It was dawn before Pete Manx slept. And by that time his plans were made. It would take several days at least, he knew, to prepare his materials. Even then, something might conceivably go amiss. It usually did. Yet Pete Manx's round face bore a seraphic smile as he dropped into audible slumber on a pile of silks and furs.

The war was over, for the nonce—at least until the next attack. There was little for the male slaves to do. Manx found it not too difficult to enlist helpers. He worked with them under the noses of the Amazons who, of course, did not know what it was all about.

"A big spotlight will help a lot," he informed Antigonus. "And that means electricity—batteries. Simple ones. Zinc, copper, and sulphuric acid. I can make zinc—let's see—by distilling it with carbon. Only I need the ore."

Antigonus scratched his head. "Zinc is alloyed with copper to make brass. I know that."

Pete Manx grinned delightedly.

"You've got some? Swell!"

Sulphuric acid was not difficult, either. There were two ways of obtaining it that Pete Manx could employ; he could distil alum, or he could burn sulphur with salt-petre. He chose the easier method, with satisfactory results. In the end he had several crude but workable batteries, consisting chiefly of two rods—one of zinc, one of copper—immersed in dilute sulphuric acid. Wire was somewhat more difficult, but Manx finally drew some through a die he laboriously drilled.

Meanwhile, with the aid of Antigonus, he organized the slaves. It was, necessarily, a whispering campaign. But the Amazons had such a contempt for men that none of the warrior-women suspected what was going on.

"Dopes," Mr. Manx remarked scornfully to himself. "This is gonna be easy."

He sought out Antigonus. "Know what creosote is?" he wanted to know.

"No. Is it something to eat?"

Manx shook his head. "Not exactly. Never mind. I'll just look around a bit."

He experimented with various bushes, burning them and distilling the vapors. The sulphuric acid helped, too. At last he had several jugs filled with a deceptively mild-looking fluid that had a smoky, curious odor. Some of this he supplied to each of the men assigned to laundry duty.

"Just drop it in the tubs," he instructed. "That's all."

The initial step was to start the Amazons wondering. After a consultation with Antigonus, he managed to swipe Queen Thecla's sword and spent a difficult night electroplating it.

The next morning when the Amazon ruler unsheathed the blade at the pagan matin prayer, every eye was riveted on the weapon. It had apparently turned to copper, except for a line of Greek letters that read crisply:

The Curse of Artemis on the Amazons

A gasp of amazement went up. Those who were close enough to make out the message whispered it to their neighbors. Thecla looked worried. And like wildfire

the story ran through the camp.

The curse of Artemis! But why—how—

They were not long in finding out. Those Amazons who had donned clean clothing that day began to twitch uneasily. They scratched futilely at their armor. Groups of them went down to the river to bathe.

It did no good. The strange malady persisted. The brawny Clio nearly dislocated a shoulder trying to scratch her back. Moreover, the slaves who had done the washing the day before all had an angry rash about their wrists.

Pete Manx thought happily about creosote and satisfactory imitations of it, and chuckled to himself as he watched Clio frantically writhing in her armor. He ducked for cover as the Amazon glared at him and snatched up a convenient spear.

THERE WERE other manifestations that day. Pete Manx had seen to it. The horses could not be ridden, since their trappings had been well soaked in an irritating but harmless compound the ingenious Mr. Manx had prepared. Since horses were sacred to Artemis, the Amazons felt more and more uneasy as the day wore on.

He had even made use of the time-honored dribble glass, boring tiny holes in metal goblets, so that when the Amazons drank, the result was far from neat.

It was sound psychology, for the warrior-women, despite their habits, were vain as peacocks, and wore gorgeous trappings. Quantities of these were ruined, and a great many tempers lost in the process. Pete Manx wandered about with a blandly innocent eye, watching the steady demoralization of the Amazons.

He did not want to go too far. He was merely breaking the ground for tonight's *coup de grace*. Even so, Clio sought him out and showed him the point of her sword.

"Do you know anything about this?" she snarled.

"I?" Pete Manx was the picture of injured innocence. "Why, what's wrong?"

But it was quite obvious what was wrong. On Clio's sword blade was copperplated a Greek sentence that was, to say the least, rather insulting. The Amazon, purple with fury, cursed Manx in terse monosyllables.

"If you weren't the Queen's favorite," she ended, gripping the sword hilt, "I'd slice you into food for vultures. Miserable worm of a man!" She looked more than ever like Margie.

There was a shriek from a nearby pavilion. Queen Thecla appeared, a golden jar in one hand and a look of anguish on her face. She was preceded by a strong and unpleasant odor.

"What now?" Clio inquired grumpily.

"My perfumes," Thecla gasped. "My most precious ointments—ambergris, atar of roses. Smell this."

She thrust the jar at Clio, who was rash enough to sniff. Both Amazons turned a delicate peagreen. Even Pete Manx who had spent a few hours mixing iron pyrites with other nauseous chemicals, gulped unhappily.

"It—does smell," Clio said inadequately.

"It's the curse!" Thecla whispered. "Artemis is avenging herself on us. But why?"

The other Amazon shrugged and scratched her flank. "I never heard of a curse like this. Lightning I can understand. But smells and itches! 'Tis more like the work of a mischievous satyr."

The queen hurled the golden jar into the river. "We shall sacrifice to Artemis when the moon rises, and beg for forgiveness. Hera help us!"

Pete Manx, who had retreated into the shadow of a bush, grinned diabolically. All was going even better than he had planned.

He made a quick trip of inspection to the sacred grove, where he examined the altar of Artemis and checked the batteries and improvised searchlight he had set up there. There was nothing amiss. He was ready.

Minor manifestations continued all that day. By sundown the Amazons were in a state of nervous exhaustion. By moonrise they were fit to be tied. Matters were scarcely helped when the queen, drawing out her golden crown from its jeweled chest, discovered that the diadem had apparently turned to some dull, grayish metal. Luckily for Pete Manx, she did not scrape through the plating to the solid gold beneath.

In a body the Amazons trooped toward the grove. They gathered there before the altar, while their worried ruler sacrificed to Artemis. Nothing happened.

The silence was broken. From the direction of the camp came a loud chant, confused and unmusical, in which could be traced some vague resemblance to *Mademoiselle from Armentieres*. It made, at any rate, a stirring marching song. The Amazons stirred uneasily.

WHAT IN the name of Hera was this?

An unsightly rabble of slaves—men—pouring toward the grove, shouting, singing and carrying banners inscribed with strange and fantastic devices.

"'Equal rights for slaves!'" Thecla gasped. "Suffrage for men!" "We want the vote!" Have they gone mad?" Her eyes had widened with amazement.

The banners were plain to read in the bright moonlight. They demanded recognition.

"No more K.P.!" said one. Another went into more detail. "Are we mice or men? We want the four freedoms!" A third declared "We'll wear the greaves in our families!"

"They are mad," Clio said. "Shall I gather a few warriors and drive them back to camp?"

But by this time the men were within the grove. They came to a halt, milling around in an uncertain fashion. Abruptly a blazing light flashed out of the darkness in the trees. It fell full on the altar of the goddess.

Ventriloquism was only one of Pete Manx's accomplishments. Lurking in

the gloom, he cupped his hands to his mouth and spoke.

"Gather 'round, folks! I come here to instruct you—Amazons and gentlemen! Just a bit closer, there. Now—"

Antigonus had been previously instructed.

"'Tis Artemis!" he shouted. "'Tis the goddess!"

Clio grew rather pale. "It is not meant for men to be in the sacred grove," she said. "Drive them away."

"Hold!" Pete Manx's disguised voice shrilled through the clearing. He swung the guide-wires to the searchlight so that its beam found Clio. "My message is for all."

"She has brought the moon down from the skies," Thecla whispered.

There was a pause. Then the queen bowed before the altar. "We give you worship, Great Huntress. Why are you angry with us?"

Pete Manx almost purred. This was too easy. He took a deep breath.

"It ain't right. It is not meant for women to rule men."

"It has always been thus among the Amazons," Clio cried.

"Then it's gotta be changed," Pete Manx said doggedly. "I'm your goddess and what I say goes. This set-up ain't natural. It's all right for women to have their rights, but making the men your slaves ain't—is not meet."

Thecla spoke unbelievably. "You would have us live as the Greeks do?"

"Sure," Pete Manx told her, switching the searchlight again. "Equal rights. The women gotta stay home and mind the kids. The men—er—make a living."

The queen drew a long shuddering breath and glanced around at the ranks of frozen astounded Amazons.

"We obey, Oh goddess," she whispered. "If this is why you put your curse upon us we obey."

"Swear it," Pete Manx said inexorably.

The queen dropped on her knees, as did the other warrior-women. But before she could speak, there was an inter-

ruption. With a clatter of racing hoofs, a charger thundered into the clearing, carrying on its back an Amazon who bore a rather grim resemblance to Tony Galento.

"What?" the woman bellowed. "Amazons on their knees?"

"Urganilla!" Clio cried. "'Tis Artemis who speaks to us."

Urganilla! Pete Manx's knees turned to castinets. This was the woman who knew him as a traitor, the one who would denounce him at sight. A fine time for her to arrive!

The war-charger stepped about nervously.

"Time enough for the goddess later!" Urganilla roared. "I have ridden hard and fast to bring news! The Greeks have rallied and will be upon us by midday tomorrow. We must march to meet them or they will fall upon us here in the camp."

CLIO'S SWORD whipped out, but Queen Thecla struck down the other's arm. "Nay, Artemis has spoken! We are no longer the rulers here. By the goddess's command, we must go to our tents. 'Tis the men who must sally forth to fight the Greeks."

She strode forward, extending her sword, hilt first to the shrinking Antigonus.

"Here. This shall be yours."

"B-but!" stuttered Antigonus. "Your Majesty, we cannot fight."

"You must. Else the Greeks will slaughter us all. It is the divine command."

The men dropped their banners and wailed in horror. Above the tumult rose Antigonus' terrified voice.

"Nay, we have no wish to rule. We are content as we were. It was that slave Petros Mancos who bent us to his wishes. We d-don't want equal rights. Oh, your Majesty, please let us go back to our tents and do the washing as we've always done."

"Petros Mancos!" There was fury in Clio's voice. "I suspected him of trouble-

making. Where is he now?"

Antigonus was spared the necessity of answering. Urganilla's horse, frightened by the commotion, danced over to the altar and tried to mount it. The searchlight swung wildly as flying hooves jerked at concealed wires. The glaring beam swept in an arc and, as though guided by some malevolent demon, rested on the shrinking figure of Pete Manx, cowering in the lower branches of an olive tree.

"Petros Mancos!" It was Clio who spoke, and in no friendly voice.

"Nay," Urganilla bellowed. "That is not his name. That coward slave is Zeno, who once betrayed us to the Greeks. I promised then that I would tear out his heart and eat it. *A-argh!*"

She hurled herself from the horse's back and plunged like a beserk gorilla toward Pet Manx.

There was no time for thought. Automatically Pete Manx jerked at a wire, and the searchlight's beam vanished. In the sudden darkness, he descended from the olive tree and took to his heels. Behind him he heard a thunderous crash and a roar of searing oaths. There was tumult.

"Find him!" Clio shouted. "Throw a cordon around the camp. Search the tents! Warn the sentries! We shall slay him together. Urganilla."

"Oh, gosh." Pete Manx gasped as he fled for his life. "This is the worst yet. What a spot!"

Impartially he cursed Professor Aker, Margie, the Amazons, and Fate.

Pine torches flared. The camp was a riot of activity. The men were cowering in their tents, horrified at the result of their abortive rebellion. The women went raging about, swords bared, keen eyes searching for sight of Mr. Manx.

That worthy was high in an oak tree, sharing his quarters with a disinterested owl. He had already tried to pass alert sentries, and escaped capture only by the skin of his teeth. He was safe on his precarious perch till daylight. Then anything could happen.

"Think, brain," Pete admonished himself. "Quick, go to town. I've gotta figure something out, and fast."

Then inspiration came. Pete Manx let out a subdued whoop of joy that made the owl contemplate him curiously. With a quick glance around, he descended from the oak and stealthily slipped off into the gloom.

There was a way, a desperate one, but it was the only chance Pete Manx had. If it worked, he might save his skin.

Twenty minutes later the searchlight again blazed out on the clearing in the sacred grove. An Amazon saw it, then another. One by one, and two by two, the perspiring, panting warriors hurried off to investigate.

They found Pete Manx sitting on the altar, swinging his legs and grinning.

"Wait," said an Amazon, seizing her companion's arm. "Urganilla will wish to kill the slave herself. He cannot escape."

Pete Manx seemingly had no wish to escape. He waited till Queen Thecla and Clio had appeared, then leaped nimbly to the ground. In the distance the bellying of Urganilla was growing louder. Someone had told her that the culprit had been found.

"It is no use to throw yourself on my mercy," Thecla said coldly. "You must die."

"Let me slay him," Clio urged.

"Urganilla shall have that pleasure. For his blasphemy he deserves death."

"Well, here she is," Clio said, smiling in a pleased fashion.

Urganilla burst into view, roared, and made for Pete Manx, sword flashing. Pete Manx summoned all his courage.

"Halt!" he yelled.

Automatically the Amazon slowed down. Manx followed up his advantage.

"Listen," he said. "This ain't fair. I don't mind a fight, but that dame's got a sword."

URGANILLA LAUGHED like a hyena. "With my bare hands I shall crush you. I need no sword." She hurled it away.

Pete Manx nodded, glancing around the ring of Amazons. "Fair enough. You ladies think you're pretty tough. But you never run up against a real man before. If you ain't afraid of me, Urgie, how about a wrestling match?"

Someone laughed. Even the giantess could not repress a grin.

"Puny shrimp! Aye, we wrestle. As you like. No one has ever challenged me and lived."

Pete Manx looked at Thecla. "How about it? If I win, can I go free?"

The queen nodded. "Aye, poor fool, if you win."

And with that the female gorilla rushed at Pete Manx.

There was a confused tangle a shriek of agony from Urganilla, and the lady landed flat on her back near the altar. Mr. Manx brushed off his sleeve and sighed in a bored fashion.

The Amazons gasped.

Urganilla bounced up.

"Yaah!" she bellowed. "By Zeus, Hero, Apollo and all the devils of Hades, I shall eat your heart for this!"

She looked as if she meant it.

Instead, she described an arc that ended at the foot of a gnarled oak. Urganilla twitched a few times, then lay still. There was blank silence.

Pete Manx yawned. "Anybody else?" he inquired. "One at a time, of course. That'll make it last longer."

Clio accepted the offer. Grinning with fury, she leaped for Manx. Then, suddenly, she screamed at the top of her voice and almost turned a backward somersault, landing heavily on her back.

She did not offer to get up.

"Well, I'm open to offers," Pete Manx remarked. "Winner take all. Who wants to wrestle?"

An Amazon glanced at Thecla for permission which was given with a nod. She landed on top of Clio. Another tried her luck. Then another. None of them had better luck.

Thecla was the last. She, too, uttered a piercing scream and fell sprawling. By the time she revived, the other Ama-

zons were sitting quietly in a group, staring at Pete. The queen gulped.

"Forgive us," she said unsteadily. "We did not recognize you in mortal form, O Zeus. Loose no more lightnings upon us. Only tell us how we can serve you and atone for our blindness."

"Forget it," Pete Manx said generously. "Just see it don't happen again, that's all. You trot out and drive off the Greeks, and we'll call it quits."

"As you command," Thecla said humbly, and all the Amazons crawled off backwards, dragging with them the unconscious bodies of Urganilla and Clio. Pete Manx heaved a deep sigh.

"Women!" he said bitterly.

Whoosh!

He was, of course, back in the laboratory, sitting in the time machine chair and looking up into the massive red face of Professor Aker. The scientist appeared rather repentant.

"Well," said Pete Manx. "A fine pal you turned out to be."

"I couldn't resist the temptation," Aker explained, helping the other stand up on cramped legs: "Besides, I've always been curious about the Amazons. It worked out all right, I see. Eh?"

"No thanks to you." Pete Manx massaged aching arms. "Oh—oh! I almost forgot. What about Margie?"

Aker fingered a slight discoloration under one eye. "She gave me a—uh—mouse, I believe it is termed. An extraordinary woman. I showed her your body and said you were dead, but she didn't believe it. She's marching up and down outside the house now, with two snakes around her neck."

THE PROFESSOR coughed. "I'm curious to know what happened to you among the Amazons, but that can wait. After meeting this—this Margie, I can't help sympathizing with you. The woman has a remarkably strong will. If you care to leave by the rear fire-escape just open that window over there."

"No, thanks." Mr. Manx whistled a few bars of a popular melody. "I'm in no

hurry. Let Margie wait a while. Want me to tell you just what happened?"

"By all means. Here, have a cigar."

Pete Manx relaxed in a comfortable chair and started talking. Half an hour later he threw away his second cigar.

"And that's all. I ain't so dumb, Prof. I can always get along."

Aker stared at him, fascinated. "How you do these things I don't know." He hesitated. "One point puzzles me. I never knew you were a wrestler. How did you manage that? Ju-jutsu?"

Pete Manx preened himself. "Brain-work was all. When those Amazons tried to wrestle me, they got a shock. A big one. I had wires up my sleeve."

"What do you mean?"

"Ever see the Electric Woman in a circus? She's got a couple of flashlight batteries in her armpits, and wires running down inside her sleeves. Touch her hand and you get a jolt. Well, I had my batteries and wire all ready, so I just found some stuff to insulate my sandals, and when the Amazons touched the wires in my hands, they got enough voltage to knock 'em endwise. A cinch." Pete Manx finished, arose and waved casually at Aker. "Be seeing you, Prof."

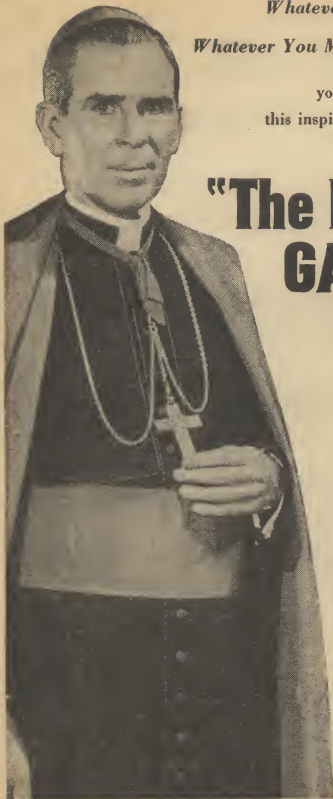
"But Margie," the scientist said, suddenly reminded. "You're not going out the front door."

"Margie ain't so bad. Just a clinging vine compared to Urganilla. I'll just stop in at the radio store next door, before seeing her." Pete Manx departed.

Professor Aker remained motionless till the sound of a feminine shriek reached his ears. Then he hastily lumbered to the front room and drew back a window curtain.

Margie was sitting on the sidewalk, her mouth wide open, and an expression of blank astonishment in her eyes. Two snakes lay motionless beside her.

And Pete Manx was swaggering down the street, the silk hat tilted at a rakish angle, while he whistled *Mademoiselle from Armentieres* with an air of gay and jubilant triumph.



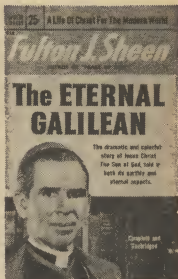
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*If Sam Burack couldn't conquer his fear, the race for the Moon
could mean the start of World War Four. . . .*





Illustration by
PAUL ORBAN

I

THE KID lived on a dried-out husk of farm in lost hill country. He slept alone in the attic. He never thought of his parents; they were dead. He hated his uncle and as soon as he could he ran away. He figured that he had left all his fears behind him in the attic. Including the fear of thunder storms. And the fear of being alone.

To prove this, he didn't smile much, and tended to his own affairs. He kept away from all but the necessary people.

He hadn't dreamed of the thunder

storm and the attic for over twenty years.

The lightning bared a dark mysterious world through the rain-washed glass.

"Sam! This is the last time I'm telling you!" That was right. His uncle would not tell him again to go out into the storm and keep those chicken coops covered. If the chickens drowned, Sam would get the harness strap.

"Sam!"

He tried to move. Thunder rolled over

the roof.

"Sam, this time you'll get the strap good!"

He couldn't move. He couldn't cry either. He couldn't tell anyone why he was afraid, or what he was afraid of. He lay there shivering as the rain splashed over the dark glass. There was no one there to tell.

"Sam! Wake up!"

HE OPENED his eyes slowly to the dark and stared into it, waiting for the voice. A face dissolved then as he switched on the light. Where he had thought he saw his uncle's face, he saw the black viewport.

His square heavy body was sticky with sweat, but the thermo gauge registered normal. There was this old pain at the back of his neck. He kneaded the flesh viciously as he moved across the closet-sized compartment and poured scotch into the glass. He shuddered a little even before the stuff touched his throat.

No thunder or lightning up here in a space station a thousand miles from Earth. But there was rain: the invisible rain of heavy primary cosmic rays ploughing through his tissues at an unhealthy rate.

But it wasn't anything from outer space threatening Burack, or the United Nations Doughnut. Man, he thought, give him everything and he makes himself a noose for his collective neck.

He turned the fan on to cool and dry his naked body. The radiation scars from World War III faded from a flushing pink to a hardly discernible shade. Why that old dream after all these years? Maura the lady psychiatrist would sure like to get her clinical hooks into that one. The hell with that. Deep space gave every one the willies, and why should he consider himself immune?

He lit a cigarette and looked out of the small viewport. As he found his gaze unmirrored by the infinite black void of space, he felt this tinge of fear

down in his belly, and he squeezed it dry as one would squeeze a rotten fruit. Dream or no dream, he liked space. He was a lot more alone in space than he had been any place else. And he had about tried them all.

He looked at the free-floating solar energy plant hooked to the Doughnut's hub. A pressure suit crawled over it like a bug on an iridescent mushroom. He could see the space platform, a big flat disk with the space rocket standing ready in the middle of it.

First the space platform. Then the space station. Now the rocket was completed. Except for the loading of propellant, the rocket was ready—for what?

Just a big pretty trigger, that space rocket. Waiting for some regressive joker to pull it and finish off what was left of the world. World War III had erupted from a much smaller incident.

The intercom buzzed. He snapped up the receiver.

"Captain Burack! You'd better post two more guards on the rocket!"

"Yes, sir."

"Right now!"

"Yes, sir."

"Then come to my office at once!"

"Yes, sir."

If it was bad enough to make the Administration nervous, it must be very bad indeed. The Chief was one man Burack had allowed himself to be dependent on. Something about that thought brought the fear back, and it was with some effort that Burack refused to think about the dream, the storm and the attic.

AS BURACK zipped into his UN uniform, the slight cynical smile left his lips. His square face became an imperturbable extension of the slate gray nylex with the small almost undiscernible insignia of the UN on the lapel.

There were seven UN guards assigned to the Doughnut, counting Sam Burack. Two of them were on guard duty now. From the others he selected two whose

respective nations had most bitterly sought to annihilate one another during World War III. It diminished the temptation for collusion. Guards were no less immune to a regression to "nationalistic fever" than any one else. They were just as likely to go into a primitive war-dance chanting "My country, right or wrong" as the civilians were, and dragging out old flag fetishes, and dusty totem insignia that said, "I'm in, buddy. You're out."

Burack roused the two guards from their sack by intercom. Then he left his compartment. He walked along the mesh grid deck of the doughnut's tubular passage curving inside the rim of the wheel.

Alone in one of the sections, he thought, you always wondered if there was any other sound, any other human beings up there after all. You always wondered if you might not be alone, and walked a little faster just to make sure you weren't.

Sam Burack always walked a little slower just to prove he didn't care.

There was this throb pulsing through the metal all the time. The hum from the machines in the hub that ground out light, heat, oxygen, and gravity. You heard that all the time. You listened for it. You were rocked to sleep by it. That hum stood between you and the frigid cold, the weightless black vacuum of space.

It drove the rim rotating around the hub. It created a frail little bit of environment a man clung to life in. It sucked gravity from centrifugal force and kept a man from feeling he was drifting away into nowhere.

Burack remembered that awful feeling of weightlessness that comes to a man like insanity when gravity goes.

The hub was built in sections that could be locked off air-tight from the others in case its skin was ripped open by a meteor strike. Section-H was a small messhall equipped with an automatic electric kitchen that turned out capsuled meals like a big gum machine.

Work, sleep, relaxation, all were staggered in unending shifts. Coffee drinkers, usually about four, were always in one of the messhalls talking.

These four stopped talking when Burack entered. They nodded, friendly enough, but their attitudes and expressions reflected the growing tension in the Doughnut.

Ramone had cracked up once, but in Burack's opinion he was the best rocket jockey who had ever lived. There was Valery the flight surgeon. There was Bjornson the structural engineer.

There was Maura too. The lady psychiatrist. She was very handsome. Also very proficient. That was fortunate, Burack figured, because she had had more work to do up here than anyone else. The toughest guys found their psyches acting up and turning sour out here in deep space.

Burack had gone to Maura once for treatment. He had been dismissed as incurable when Maura found out he was seeking strictly non-professional therapy. She had seemed to think he needed the other kind first. He had news for her though. His head had been shrinking for years, all by itself.

She was small, probably wouldn't have weighed over ninety pounds sopping wet, but she had been assembled with an eye to perfection. Her short wavy hair was the same blue-black color as her eyes. Burack had found it difficult to stop thinking about her because of the way she looked every time he saw her. He resented the fact that he could never quite keep from looking. He couldn't chance being rejected a second time.

THEN MAURA and Bjornson were getting up and coming toward Burack. Ramone, a fiery nervous little man, followed a few paces behind. Bjornson, a balding giant, waved a heavy coffee mug. "Anything from the Chief yet?"

"Not a thing," Burack said.

The steam from the coffee clouded Bjornson's glasses. "The Chief must

have gotten some good word from the General Assembly by now! This Doughnut's turning into a damn time-bomb because of that rocket!"

"Our Administrator will work out a plan to quiet the tension," Burack said.

"What's going on?" Ramone whispered. "Why's the Chief hiding out all the time?"

"You guys tell me," Burack said. As usual he found himself avoiding the professional probe of Maura's eyes. "I haven't heard anything. You probably know what's boiling up in here better than I do."

"You just posted two more guards on the rocket," Maura said.

"The Chief's orders," Burack said.

"Yours but to do and die," Ramone said.

"A big gesture from the Administrator," Maura said sharply. "Post two more guards on the rocket!"

"What for?" Bjornson asked. "Is this a UN scientific project? Or an armed camp?"

"It's whatever you make it," Burack said.

"But you're out of it, are you, Captain?" Maura asked. "What happens to the rest of us, or the world for that matter. It makes no difference to you?"

"That uniform," Bjornson said as he flicked some lint from Burack's shoulder, "doesn't alienate you from the human race."

"Or does it?" Ramone asked.

"Look, fellas," Burack raised his hand in mock penance. "I'm sorry. I just follow orders. Go bellyache to the Chief, not me."

Ramone said. "The Chief doesn't seem to be very interested in holding open house these days."

Bjornson's whisper sounded abruptly as though he were trying to speak louder but couldn't. "Anarchy, mutiny! God knows what's building up here, Captain! And the Chief doesn't budge from that sanctum of his. Doesn't even make a little pep-talk. He doesn't do anything but make the tension worse by posting

two more guards!"

"He's just as human as any of us," Maura said.

"Now listen," Burack said. "The Chief's working something out. He'll take care of it!"

"Father knows best," said Maura, always the lady psychiatrist.

Valery stayed at the table staring into his coffee. Maura was studying Burack with this steady professional curiosity. Maybe that was the only kind of curiosity she had for him, Burack thought.

"Why the two extra guards?" Ramone insisted.

"In case of an invasion from Mars," Burack said.

"Very funny," Bjornson said. "I didn't know you had such a delicate sense of humor."

Burack started for the exit. "If anything comes in, you kids will be the first to know."

Just then, Ramone started to scream. His voice got higher until it sounded like an hysterical woman's.

"You took the oath to support the UN against all enemies within and without, Burack! This Doughnut is *all* nations. It's no 'state.' It's the world! It's an idea, the symbol of an idea. We built it. We control it. None of us were born in it. The only flag that's ever flown from it is the UN flag. We're our only enemy. Captain! Think of what it meant once, if it ever meant anything to you. Get some action out of the Chief. *Do something!*"

It gave Burack a vague sense of unease to realize suddenly that they were looking to him.

"Better give Ramone some insulin," Burack said to Maura. Then he left Section-H.

What the hell kind of a look did she give him, he thought, as he walked through the tube toward the Chief's office? Like she felt sorry for him? A smug dame wrapped up in her own cocoon of clinical security. What was *she* afraid of that she had to keep a clinician's couch and an electroencephalo-

graph between herself and some good clean honest physical living?

II

THE ADMINISTRATIVE CHIEF was small, but tight and wiry. There was always this suggestion of tremendous energy skillfully controlled and channeled, always on an unbreakable leash of will. Everything about him, his posture, the precise way he moved around, the stillness of his hands, the way he looked straight at you out of bright alert eyes, indicated this coolness.

Only now he was standing with his back to Burack. He hadn't turned when Burack came in. He was looking out the viewport, and behind his back his hands sought one another with undisguised nervousness.

Some kind of fear inched into Burack's consciousness. He needed the Chief to stand firm. He depended on this rock of individuality, of unshakable calm, this steel column standing solid in the rising flood.

"It just came in, Sam. Secret code. It's only a matter of a short time now until the radioman figures it out for himself. Then it will be all over the Doughnut."

"*Res nullius?*"

"That's right. I knew they would consider the Moon as free for occupation."

"If the moon's declared free for occupation by whoever gets there first," Burack said, "it means war."

"That's right. It means the UN still has a long way to go before it becomes a fact instead of a theory. If that General Assembly had taken up this problem a month from now, or three months back, their decision probably would have been different. The moon would automatically have been declared a possession of the United Nations, instead of belonging to whoever could get there first and stick up some state's flag on it!"

"But they didn't."

"The nationalistic virus can be pushed

down, buried, left to starve and die of eventual neglect. Meanwhile it flares up again. Nobody knows when it will flare up, or why. It's going to be hard to defeat. And now maybe there won't be enough time."

The Chief turned. He sat down and looked straight into Burack's face. Only the mask had a hole in it. Burack saw the slight twitch at the corner of the Chief's face.

"Some coalition group pushed this primitive legal code through. Sam. By a vote of three. As though space was just a big Antarctic continent free for occupation by anybody who gets there first! The motivation's probably unconscious. They might change it a week from now. They probably don't even know the real reason for voting the Moon free for occupation."

"What are we going to do about it?" Burack asked.

The Chief whispered. "Nothing. There's nothing I can do, Sam."

"There must be something, sir. Some legal loophole you can use. This may decide whether the world hangs together or burns up in separate states."

"I know that, Sam! All good men up here, the best. But this regression to nationalistic feeling is a disease! It has to be destroyed by time and neglect. Time and accident have beaten us. The men up here are as devoted to the UN as anyone has ever been. But—I don't know—it's the effect of deep space. They've all been hit hard psychologically. Any little bit of insecurity and space brings it out. There's been too much pressure, Sam. At least two thirds of our personnel are working up to it, have been ever since that space rocket neared completion. They're all plotting separately to take that rocket and get to the moon to claim it for the country of their birth. They've been waiting for this decision from the General Assembly."

"And there's nothing you can do, sir?"

"What? What can I do? There'll be shooting, maybe even some killing. It's all set up. The moon, the richest mineral

field ever discovered. Surface metals for the taking, an endless supply. Metals bombarded by undiffused cosmic rays and changed so that now the moon's an incredible treasure house! They'll fight over it, Sam, once the precedent's established. It'll start here. It's going to start any minute!"

Then the Chief added. "For all I know you're plotting to take that rocket yourself, Sam. Even you. You wouldn't be responsible anyway. No one is."

"Not me," Burack said. "That's for the birds."

BURACK WAITED. He looked around the office where the Chief slept, ate and which he stuck to like a monk to his cell. Burack seemed to see it for the first time now.

It resembled a room transferred intact from some comfortable suburban home of the Chief's birth. Every freight load up from Earth had brought a few more personal things for the Chief. Books, magazines, pictures of his wife and kids, mementoes, domestic treasures, a cup he'd won in a golf tournament twenty years ago, a pot with a geranium in it, a stuffed fish he'd snagged before the war and had had mounted on a redwood plank. Very cozy, Burack thought. Homelike.

He could feel the sweat running down under his uniform. He couldn't say anything. The air seemed too thin all at once. It seemed too hot to breathe. He wanted to get out of there. There wasn't much of any place to go in a space station. There was the rocket. But very soon now there would be some bloody competition there.

All good guys, he thought, but maybe space was too big for the best of them. The Chief's image seemed to blur slightly as though Burack were seeing him through watered glass.

If the Chief couldn't take it, no one could. When the great symbol became cracked clay everything became clay after tomorrow. . . .

The Chief was staring at Burack with

a kind of desperate curiosity.

"We fought together in the last war, Sam. You're a funny one though. I can't figure you. You were born in the same country as I was. You ever thought about that lately?"

"What country?" Burack said softly. "Hell, they're all the same to me!"

"Are they? You're so sure of yourself. Tell me, Sam—you don't even care about the UN do you? Care idealistically I mean? You've been my right arm for years. You've risked your neck for the UN a hundred times. But to you it's just a secure job, as secure a job as there is in an insecure age? Is that all it is? It gives you a relative independence? What is it? What do you care about, Sam?"

"I care about doing my job the best I can, sir. I've tried to care enough about myself to make the fight worth while."

"To quote, Sam, no man is an island unto himself."

"No country is either."

"I know! I know!"

Burack stood up. His legs didn't feel particularly substantial. For some reason he had a flashing image of the attic, at night, rain whispering on the roof, rain dripping, lightning flashing, the shadows of the room flashing to a momentary and mysterious and faceless life, the waiting after that in the dark for the lightning to come again. To see if the shadows had changed, or moved.

"Whatever I am, sir, you taught me to be. During the last stretch of the war, I remember you said something to me about there being only two basic moral laws. The first was the survival of self. The second, without which the first would be impossible, was the survival of the world."

The Chief sat down. He just sat there. He sat there and stared at Burack who went to the exit panel and opened it. "Are there any orders, sir?"

The Chief didn't move. He didn't say anything. He was still sitting there that way, like something afraid to move, like dry clay afraid to shift its crumbling

outline, when Burack went out and shut the panel behind him.

BURACK STOPPED in his cabin to check the guard post on the space platform. At the same time he found that the Guard Officer was trying to get through to him.

"Captain! It's like a crazy magic act."

"What is?"

"Insignia, sir! They're sprouting out all over the space rocket!"

"Insignia?"

"The colors of every nation that ever was, sir. I figure it's delayed action paint, put on earlier in secret. And it's just now popping out all over—"

"Who is out there now, besides the guard?"

"Just the guys loading the last of the propellant, sir."

"What? Who gave orders to load propellant?"

"The Chief, sir. Those orders have been on the clips here for a week. Those orders—"

"Never mind." Burack cut in. "Get a man up there to paint out those insignia. On the double now, and send one of the guards up to do it."

"But, sir, who knows—"

"Just grab a civilian out of the supply igloo there! Someone's on duty there! Get a spray-gun. Paint, any color paint. Just paint that insignia!"

"Yes, sir."

Burack ran out of the cabin. He should be out there by the rocket. Out there on the space platform. Out there where he belonged—

Delayed action paint. Crazy marble-heads, every one of them. Probably every guy in the Doughnut had managed to do that, scientists turning into crazy kids wanting to put their little sign on a big new toy. They had figured, or wanted to figure for psychological reasons, that the General Assembly would declare the moon free for occupation. Only the timing wasn't—it couldn't have been that good!

No one had known when the Assembly

would release a report. Evidently all or some of them knew about that secret code message to the Chief. Someone out there, probably one of those loading propellant, had turned the light on the metal to bring out the colors of the various insignia.

Who? That didn't matter. Whoever it was hadn't known that practically every other joker had gotten the same idea. The mind of genius, turned regressive, could run backward down the same greased grove to blind self-destruction.

He kept thinking almost savagely that he had to get out there where he belonged. He sent out the two remaining guards armed with space rifles for themselves and the other four. He was still repeating over and over to himself that he had to get out there as he entered the tiny reception room of the Medical Ward Section.

"I was wondering when you'd come back, Captain." Maura said, with that damned calm exterior of hers.

"And you were waiting breathlessly—with open calibrator."

"Just sit down a minute, I'll be right with you, Captain."

"Wait a minute. I haven't any time to wait. I've got to have a pill. You gave me a pill before that helped—I mean—about the weightlessness."

"Oh, yes. The weightlessness."

When she opened the panel into the next room, he heard a murmur of voices. He recognized Ramone, his voice still high with intensity. And Bjornson.

"What goes in there?" Burack asked. "Group therapy?"

"I know how scared you are, Captain. You don't have to keep on trying to cover up." And then she added, "You'd better *not* keep on trying to cover it up."

"Doc, just one of the pills! No streamlined, capsuled head-shrinking, please! I've got to get out there to the space rocket!"

"Just sit there and relax. You can't cure everything all at once. I'll bring you something better than your pill. I've been working on it. It's called adhyml."

"I don't care what it's called. But hurry it up will you, Doc?"

She went out. The panel closed. Burack restrained an almost panicky desire to find a viewport and look out. It was probably breaking now. No one could tell what was happening inside this sound-proofed roulette wheel. But that insignia sprouting meant only one thing: the rush was either on right now, or everyone was about to make a grab for that space rocket to claim the moon.

Burack was supposed to be out there. This time he wasn't even thinking about what he would do if he were out there. Give a warning? It wouldn't be obeyed. Then start shooting? If one or two or even a few more were the only ones responsible it would be easier. But this fiasco included practically everyone. They didn't shoot old friends for momentary compulsive reactions to some old hangover disease. Not in the age of Neo-Freud!

Or maybe he would. What the hell was it to him? He had his orders. The Chief surely had it figured out, knew what he was doing. He *had* to know.

But, on the other hand, what *was* the Chief doing?

Burack should be out there. He should know what every one was doing.

But he was afraid.

III

MAURA CAME BACK in stirring a white effervescence in a tall glass. He could still hear the murmuring in that other room as Maura closed the panel.

"Here, Captain. Hold your nose and drink it down like a big man."

He drank it. "Thanks, Mother." He looked at the dreg in the glass. It did resemble milk.

"Well," she said. "Everybody on the Doughnut knows the moon's been declared free for occupancy. It's too late for me to try some kind of therapy. Anyway, it would take too long. I know that you know it could mean another war, the end of the world. But, Captain,

do you *care*?"

"I've posted guards. I'm going out there myself. What do you think I—"

"I'm not flattered that you seem to care what I think, Captain. What do *you* think, about Sam Burack. You don't seem to be bubbling over with enthusiasm about looking in a mirror."

He stood up quickly. He took hold of her arms. She was standing very close to him, looking up with that old mixture of personal and clinical concern. There was a flashing vitality about her eyes when you got up real close and took a good deep look. "I'm getting sick of you and everybody else with the guilties pointing a finger at me as though some way or other I'm supposed to play the hero!"

"No drug can kill the kind of fear you've been living with all your life, Captain. You've been fighting all your life with yourself, trying to prove *you* don't need anybody. All a lie. What happens, Captain, if your idol, the Chief, happens to fall?"

"He won't."

"Maybe he already has."

"He never will."

"He could have tried to prevent *all* this anyway, Captain. He could have stopped construction on the rocket. He could have prevented the loading of propellant. He could at least have talked to all of us, tried to work it out. A month ago he had everyone's greatest respect. His words would have meant a lot."

"You should have done for the UN what the Chief's done."

"I'm not blaming him." She shook her head slowly. "We've got to figure out what's right and do it ourselves. If we could take it somewhere into space and keep it, anything to stop this terrible thing from happening!"

"That's mutiny," Burack cut in quickly. "Defying the UN law wouldn't solve anything either, not in the long run. The Chief must be working on something. He'll spring something any time now."

"You have to believe that, don't you, Captain?"

Burack realized that he still held her arms, that she hadn't tried to move away. The flesh of her arms felt hot, almost accusing, and at the same time he felt himself reaching out toward her, and with that feeling a kind of dizziness and insubstantiality. All at once he hated her, and he was scared of something.

He pulled her tightly to him and kissed her. She was soft against the hardness of his arms, and her lips parted slightly, then she turned her head away, still not moving.

"I could have told you I loved you," Burack whispered. "I could have told you that plenty of times, I could have told you a lot of things. But you would only have written it all down in your little book. You don't really care about me, or anybody else, the UN included. All you care about is playing Mother. Making everybody feel crazy so they'll need you and you'll know you're needed for something too. You aren't much different than any of the other jokers out here—"

"Please," she said then. "This kind of talk is really unworthy of you, Captain. I know that you're only saying this because you're afraid of me. And that you're afraid of me because you're afraid of yourself. You're certainly not afraid of anything else. And that," she said then with a slight smile, "is why I could love you too, Captain."

He tried to grin to show that he didn't care. He backed away toward the exit panel again.

"You ever wonder, Captain, why only three or four out of all the people up here, didn't give in to nationalistic fever? Why you and I haven't, as well as Ramone and Bjornson? I'll tell you why. I'm an orphan too, like you. In one way or another, we're all four of us psychological orphans. Maybe we're the only ones who can take it for long out in deep space. People who have learned at an early age to be their own father and mother." She paused. "But first, Captain, you've got to realize that no one

can live alone. A man can't and survive. A nation can't, and live. That's why there's the UN for nations. And that's why there are people—for one another."

He managed a kind of laugh. "Go on and play your Freudian fiddles while this station blows up!"

"I hope we can do something about that, Captain. But there's another tragedy too—if you never stop trying to pretend that you don't care."

HE SAW MEN running through the tube. Each man had what he evidently considered his own secret purpose. But each man's purpose was the same.

There was a fixed kind of paranoiacal aura around all of them. Burack supposed, as he ran, that Maura would say was a desire to get back to the womb, to Mother Earth. Back to some familiar old plot of land called home, right or wrong. Or a resurgence of the old desire to shine alone as a hero, to win plaudits for the home team as against the other teams.

Only this was a grotesque Caucus Race, because they were racing against time and themselves. And there couldn't be a winner.

Section-J contained the pressure suits, oxygen tanks, general supplies. There was the main airlock for getting in and out of the Doughnut. There were other emergency exits. All at once, Burack realized that he wasn't seeing anyone any more. *He had to get out there.*

He was inside Section-J. And then he decided with a kind of bitter panic that he couldn't leave the safe gravity of the Doughnut. *He couldn't do it!*

The shadows of the pressure suits equipment threw a shadow over his face as he stood there. He was staring at the inner lock door, listening to the mocking whisper of hissing air. He caught just a glimpse of a frightening and altogether empty infinity in the viewport's unblinking eye.

He stumbled over to the bulkhead and leaned on it. The thing in the attic had never been killed at all. Sometimes,

to go on living with a thing, it's necessary to pretend it isn't there.

He raised his head slowly and saw them standing there looking at him.

Ramone. And Maura.

"We've got to work together, the three of us," Ramone said simply. "They're not going to kill one another to get that rocket, and then start a war over who gets the moon. The three of us are the only ones who can stop it, Captain."

"Get the hell out of here! Both of you. I've got to get out there to the rocket."

"Then go ahead," Maura said. He could barely hear her. Her eyes seemed wet. Pity, was that what it was?

"You two, and Bjornson, you've probably been plotting to take that rocket yourselves," Burack yelled. "What are you trying to do, kid me, make a sucker out of me? You want me to use my authority as a Captain of the UN Guards and get out there, get you into the Rocket, use the arms of the UN Guard to clear the way? Is that it? So you've made a deal to claim the moon, and split the proceeds? That it?"

"Go on out there. Captain," Maura whispered. "Put on the pressure suit."

"This will go on the record," Burack yelled louder. "These other men have just gone temporarily insane. They'll never be held responsible. Nationalism is a recognized psychological problem! But you have deliberately tried to talk me into a defiance of the Chief. Isn't that right?"

"Can you think of a better way?" Ramone said. "You're a very smart fellow, Captain. We've depended on you to take over and do something. We're with you. Do what's right. Think of something. do anything. We can take that rocket—"

"That wouldn't solve anything!"

"Will going out there," Maura said, "and shooting your friends down do any good either? You've already said they weren't responsible."

The point was, Burack thought with sickness gorging his throat, he couldn't go out there anyway. They were right.

He was afraid.

"I guess I'll go back and get drunk," Ramone said. He turned and slumped out.

Maura came toward him. Her hand touched his hand. "You never had any roots at all, Captain. Neither did I. I know what you've lived with. I know what you've lived without. No family, no children, no parents. Nothing. No one can be tough enough to go it completely alone, Captain. I can't either. I know it. Do you know it?"

She hesitated. "Especially out here where there's only you and that out there—just black space with nothing to hold on to."

"I'll go see the Chief," Burack said. "I'll find out what the plans are."

She shook her head. "He's out of it. If anything's done now, you'll have to do it."

"What makes you so sure of that?"

"Believe me, this is purely professional, Captain. The Chief's out of it. Listen, Captain. You're stuck with the problem. You never had a family, a country really, any place to call your own. The UN's all you've ever belonged to, the only thing that's ever really claimed you. It's your only identity. And it isn't anything like a country, or a plot of land, or a wife. It's the whole world. It's an idea, an ideal. It's something that can only be alive and stay alive in your own heart."

For a long moment desperately he looked into her eyes, then he ran out into the tube and toward the Chief's quarters.

The Chief wasn't there.

When he called the Officer of the Guard, Burack was told that the Chief had just reached the space platform, armed with a space rifle.

IV

WHEN BURACK got back to Section-J, Maura was still there standing as though she never intended to go away.

Again, he approached the pressure

suit hanging and waiting there on the rack. Going out there, he had to do that. But going out there to stand guard and end up killing wasn't the answer. He wore the uniform to protect an idea, not destroy it. To protect the UN was to protect himself. She was right. In order to keep on living he had to protect his house and home. His house and home was the world.

Sweat ran down his face. His heart was going off in his chest like an alarm.

The UN was the only identity he had with life, with the future, with any reason at all to live or die.

"Can't you see now what it is, Captain," Maura was saying. He couldn't seem to see her face clearly. "Every one has an initial terror of weightlessness when they hit zero gravity. Most can adapt to it after a while if it's just a physical problem. But it's more than that with you. Can't you see what it is?"

"You're afraid to go into zero-gravity again. Captain. Could you admit that you're afraid of the whole emotional significance of 'loss of support'? Isn't that what zero-gravity means, really means to you, Captain? Weightlessness. Meaninglessness. No purpose, no goal, a feeling of just falling, out of control. Into an empty nowhere?"

HE LEANED his head into the bulkhead and closed his eyes. He couldn't have admitted that lying up there in that attic alone he had often cried. That he had cried and wondered why someone didn't come up there to kiss him good-night. He had wondered why there was no soft laughter to laugh with him when he had wanted to laugh. Why there had never been anyone to put their arms around him up there in the dark when the thunder rolled, and the lightning burned terror through the raw empty places of his soul?

He couldn't have admitted it then. He had never thought about it since. But he thought about it now, deeply and unrecognizably he thought of it. Only it was raw feeling, a kind of shuddering

inside that turned into blind black fear.

Chief. Father. Idol. If you go, then everything goes. Who will bring me back from the weightless void, the bottomless pit, the well whose only name is loneliness?

He felt Maura's hand and he stood there holding onto it, not opening his eyes. And he stood there that way for a minute that was many years.

"The UN," he said. "It's the only identity I have with life, with the future, with any reason at all to live or die."

"What about me?" Maura said. This time she kissed him, and he turned and held her tightly feeling himself going out to her unashamed as she put her head on his chest and he felt the pressure suit against his back.

"Get Ramone," Burack said. "We'll need him."

She came back almost at once with Ramone. By then Burack was almost inside the innertube. He finished lowering the innertube, then lowered the outer suit casing against which the inner suit could expand.

Ramone, without a word, started putting on a pressure suit.

"You boys will need me," Maura said and started putting on a pressure suit. Burack started to protest.

"Mother knows best," Maura said.

"What are we going to do?" Ramone asked.

"It's free-fall, Ramone. Zero-gravity."

"What about the Chief, the Authority?" Maura said.

"The UN has no authority except itself. The UN's everybody."

If there was any doubt in Maura's or Ramone's minds, they weren't letting it show. They entered the airlock. The lock door closed. They hooked up, and the innertubes began to take on pressure, climbing toward the final pressure of 70,000 pounds or 35 tons.

Automatically, as he saw Maura watching him through the helmet plate, Burack checked the small gauges inside the helmet, the thermostat, the air-conditioning system, the oxygen supply, the

walkie-talkie.

"When the outer lock door opens," Burack said, "we grab the cables to the space platform and head straight for the rocket."

He saw Maura's eyes through the helmet plate.

Ramone smiled with a flash of big white teeth. Burack turned toward the outer lock door as it started sliding open. He grabbed for the cable. It was either a free fall for Burack, or an atomic bomb free-for-all for the world.

Burack closed his eyes a moment, then dropped into zero-gravity.

THE TERROR moved in to take him. He seemed to fall endlessly deeper into sick screaming panic. The weightless falling, falling into emptiness, the clinging and sobbing and clutching at anything, and still falling down, down into nowhere.

But until now he had never thought that the destitution of weight might have been a fear of the destitution of soul.

He had avoided free-fall practice, part of the regular space orientation, the way someone might seek to avoid some contagious disease. Twice he had forced the exercise. He had learned the rudiments of self-control in zero-gravity, squirming, flailing arms and legs, he flung himself from the cable and managed to land on his hands and knees on the space platform about twenty-five feet from the rocket. A glance in the rearview mirror showed Ramone and Maura right behind him.

His insides seemed to be boiling out of him. He swallowed frantically against retching. He felt the pit of emptiness, of loneliness, the abyss of the lost and unrooted opening all around, and he was falling. He lay there hugging the thick metal of the platform, his face pressed into the small visual opening of the helmet. He lay there clutching at the metal, but still falling.

He fought for perspective, frantically knowing this was his last chance to de-

feat the terror. The feeling of perpetual falling was still there, it would always be there, but he fought to make it the illusion it really was.

No matter how his body felt, how the mechano-receptors were distorted in zero-gravity, Burack could *see*. What he saw was reality, no matter how he felt. Now he was trying to act on the logic of sight and insight, regardless of the terror, the psychological terror of loss of support.

Then he opened his eyes and saw Maura's face behind her own helmet plate only a few inches from his own. She smiled and nodded to him.

He knew one thing then, knew it with a vague strangeness that was almost a form of timidity—he knew that a man in space, a man without a country, an orphan of the world, needed someone else. He knew that he needed her. And in knowing that, he also knew that Maura needed him.

He got to his feet. He saw Ramone crouching near him and motioning toward the rocket. Then toward the Doughnut. Pressure suits were struggling in groups in a fantastic display of uncoordinated movement like an idiot ballet. A top-ranking radiologist and a specialist in fuel logistics were rolling over the platform tearing at one another's pressure suits. Three of the UN guards were ripping at one another as Burack ran forward.

Burack tore two guns free, threw them on a one-way trip into space. With Ramone's help, he dragged the other guard kicking and screaming away from the others who lay there blinking suddenly as though they had just been awakened from a bad dream.

Pressure suits were plastered all over the Doughnut like flies on a plate. Others were on cables between the Doughnut and the space platform. Other gyrated wildly at the ends of cables like fish on so many entangling lines.

"Where's the Chief?" Burack asked the guard whom he held by the radiator fin of his suit.

The guard pointed. His lips moved but no sound came out of the walkie-talkie. Burack turned just in time to see the hatch of the rocket closing.

"Chief!" Burack yelled. "Chief!"

"Captain Burack?"

"Right, sir. Let me in!"

"I don't trust you, Burack. I don't understand you."

Ramone and Maura were watching Burack closely.

Burack remembered now. The Chief's cabin. Loaded with everything that would make him feel at home. His confining himself to his cabin. Why not? Why shouldn't the Chief crack up? As Maura had said, the Chief was no idol. He was all too human.

Burack looked up. The other guard was still up there painting out insignia. One insignia remained visible, but Burack ordered the guard down. The remaining insignia was that of the country the Chief had come from and which he had desired too strongly to return to, carrying the trophy of the moon to assure his acceptance.

"I'm from the same country you are, sir," Burack said. "I hope you haven't forgotten."

"Have you forgotten, Captain?"

"No, sir, I haven't. Let me in. There isn't much time. Maybe you'll need help. Let me in!"

The hatch slid open. Burack, Maura and Ramone were inside and the hatch was sliding shut just as someone who was to remain ever unidentified opened up with a space rifle.

OUT OF their pressure suits, the three of them stood at the foot of the ladder going up into the control room. "Stay here," Burack said. "He doesn't know you're with me. I'll handle the Chief."

"What are we going to do, Captain," Ramone asked. "Take the rocket—"

"You'll see. You're going to do it, Ramone. You're the best rocket jockey that ever lived."

He looked at Maura. "I'm glad you're

along too. You're the best head-shrinker that ever lived."

Burack went up the ladder.

The Chief turned away from the control panel and gripped Burack's hand. "I'm glad," he said, "you made this decision, Sam."

"So am I, sir."

"This is the only way, isn't it?"

"I guess it is."

"Someone was going to grab this rocket and claim the moon. I couldn't stop it, not without bloodshed. If we didn't do it, someone else would. What else could we do, Sam?"

"Nothing. This is the only thing for us to do, sir."

As the Chief picked up the mike and switched on the radio to general hookup, Burack hit him on the left side of the chin. The Chief crumpled into Burack's arms. Burack called down to Maura and Ramone. Ramone dragged the Chief over against the bulkhead.

"Now what?" Maura asked.

Burack picked up the mike. "This is Captain Burack. I'm going to blast out of here in three minutes. Everybody, including the guards, all of you, get back inside the Doughnut. *Get back inside the Doughnut!*"

One warning was enough. The pressure suits squirmed frantically for sanctuary.

"Now, Ramone. Now it's your baby."

Ramone jumped into the control seat.

"Blast out of here," Burack whispered. "But we're taking the Doughnut with us!"

Ramone turned slowly. His mouth dropped open. "Huh?"

Maura's sigh was not that of a clinical psychologist. It sounded like he'd always imagined a kid would sound coming down the stairs on Christmas morning.

"You figure it out," Burack said. "Push it, pull it, but do it. Get that space station to the moon."

Ramone didn't say a word for ten minutes. He figured and calibrated and packed at the computer, then he started

the painfully slow maneuvering of the ship. No strong initial thrust was needed to nose the Doughnut out of its orbit and guide it toward the moon.

"In a little over six hours," Ramone said, "we'll be there."

He used the space platform as a buffer, and pushed the space station out of its orbit around the Earth, and in six hours and forty-five minutes the space station swung into a tight little orbit around the moon.

The Chief, sounding like his old self, made a great speech to the UN personnel of the Doughnut about a magnificent moment in the history of the UN. Everyone seemed to have forgotten the nationalistic frenzy of a few hours before,

and five cases of liquor were consumed. The space rocket circled the moon five times, and it was the Chief who crawled out and painted out the remaining insignia.

"It's only right," he said. "I put it on there. I'm taking it off."

And when the others returned to Earth on rotation leave, Burack and Maura, married by the Chief, stayed on the space station. From there they could always see the Earth as a unified whole. And it was theirs.

Burack had found out some important things about himself, he knew, but the most important thing of all was—the moon belonged to the world.

The entire world.



AMONG NEXT ISSUE'S HEADLINERS

FOG OVER VENUS

A Novel of a Space Pioneer

By ARTHUR K. BARNES

PYGMALION'S SPECTACLES

A Story of Dreams and Reality

By STANLEY G. WEINBAUM

plus

HENRY KUTTNER, RAY BRADBURY, and DR. DAVID H. KELLER

Twinkle, twinkle, little star — what a character you are!

Illustration by
ALEX SCHOMBURG



STAR PEOPLE

By R. S. RICHARDSON

Noted Astronomer



UNCONSCIOUSLY we associate things with people. Or rather, things with which we are continually in contact eventually come to have a personality for us. Doubtless most of mythology originated in this way. Some associations are common to us all; for instance, trees certainly have a person-

ality. We say, "He is like a sturdy oak; he trembled like an aspen; she drooped like a weeping willow," etc. There are countless examples. Cities often possess a definite personality, which for some reason is usually feminine. To me San Francisco will always be a mysterious veiled lady, Los Angeles a shrill strident

female, and Pasadena, where I live, is a dull old woman who needs waking up. I've never been to New York.

Recently I discovered, somewhat to my surprise, that some stars had become just like people to me. Possibly the same process of identification has been going on in your subconscious, too. If so, perhaps you'd like to compare your star people with mine. I'll introduce a few of my leading lights.

We'll start with the blazing blue-white super-giants like S Doradus and Rigel and V Puppis. These are the glamor girls of the sky, burning the candle at both ends, out for a good time at any cost. Don't talk to them about thrift and saving for a rainy day. They spend their hydrogen with a lavish hand, turning it into helium recklessly, with never a thought for the morrow. What do they care if it'll all be gone in a 100 million years? A short life and a merry one.

LET'S take a look at S Doradus, that dazzling beauty down in the southern hemisphere, shining with a radiance 300 thousand times that of our prim little sun.

You're the darling of the Large Magellanic Cloud right now, Dora dear, but there's going to come a day when the hydrogen deep inside you begins to fail. You'll look in your spectrum some morning and see those lines of the heavy metals beginning to show. You'll have that horrible sinking sensation that means the thermonuclear reactions in your convection zone are petering out. You'll have to do something, honey. You'll have to get a new look—a lift—and quick.

So you'll start to contract. Oh, contraction is wonderful at first. It works like magic. You try just a little contraction and right away you begin to heat up inside. Your thermonuclear reactions start going again. Now the hydrogen outside your isothermal core is generating energy. You're even brighter than before! Contraction has made a

new woman out of you. Whenever you need a pickup you'll just contract again.

But after a while you haven't got any hydrogen left anywhere. Now the going gets really tough. You've got to contract in earnest. In fact, there's nothing else you can do but contract. But it doesn't release that thermonuclear energy any more. Nothing but frictional heat from that hard grinding Kelvin-Helmholtz contraction.* You can't last long on that, baby. You're getting denser. . . . whirling faster and faster . . . and then you can't stand it any longer and you blow your top, and you're a nova! For a day or two you outshine every star in the sky. Maybe you become a supernova and outshine your whole galaxy.

And so you go on, contracting, spinning faster, blowing up, collapsing again. But the end is always the same. Always there's that white dwarf state staring you in the face. You finally end your career as a miserable little globule of dense matter no bigger than a planet. You've exhausted all your resources now. You're through . . . finished. All you have left is your memories, and some faded clippings from the *Astro-physical Journal*. Your only consolation is the thought that all the other stars around you, shining so smugly, will end the same way. Only difference is that you got there via the primrose path, while they took the long, hard way.

The cepheid variables are slaves to routine. They're stars that have fallen into a rut and can't get out of it. All they can do is pulsate the livelong day. Contract and fade. Expand and brighten.

Let's imagine ourselves 600 light years out in space, listening to a guide explain about Delta Cephei to a sightseer who had never seen such a critter before. The conversation might go something like this.

*Recently it has been suggested that when the temperature from contraction reaches 200 million degrees a thermonuclear reaction starts in which helium is converted into beryllium, which in turn absorbs helium to form carbon with the release of energy.

GUIDE: Yessir, that's old Delta Cephei himself. He's the daddy of 'em all. They all take after their old man.

SIGHTSEER (he has lived all his life on a chicken ranch near Van Nuys, California, and is much impressed): You mean there's other stars like that one there?

GUIDE: Scads of 'em. Delta's got more progeny around than you could shake a stick at. He's what the astronomers call a Type I cepheid.

SIGHTSEER: A real genuine Type I, huh?

GUIDE: Yep. He's got a raft of poor relations they call Type II cepheids, but they don't run through their light cycles as smooth as Delta there. (Admiringly). Just look at him swell! Must be pretty near maximum light now.

SIGHTSEER: What makes him keep working so hard that way?

GUIDE: Don't know. Just his nature, I guess.

SIGHTSEER: D'you suppose he ever eases up a little when nobody's looking?

GUIDE: (indignantly): Old Delta's been pulsatin' away like that, without a single vacation, long as anybody knows. Runs through his light cycle every 5 days, 8 hours, 47 minutes, 27 seconds, like clockwork.

SIGHTSEER: It makes me tired just standing here watching him work so hard.

GUIDE: (Chuckling): Maybe he thinks he'll get assigned a longer period if he stays on the job.

SIGHTSEER: What good'll that do him?

GUIDE: Why, if he gets a longer period then he'll shine brighter, of course. That's the funny thing about cepheids—the longer their period, the brighter they shine. Why, you can tell the candlepower of a cepheid, without ever seeing one, just as soon as you know his period of pulsation. Only you got to be careful it's not one of them ornery Type II kind. Those Type II's sure can make trouble.

SIGHTSEER: Tricky, hey?

GUIDE: Tricky! Say, do you know, way back in 1953 the astronomers discovered those Type II cepheids had been tricking 'em for years. Made 'em think the Andromeda nebula was only 750 thousand light years away instead of 1500 thousand light years.

SIGHTSEER: You don't say!

GUIDE: You see, the astronomers had got the distance to Andromeda by timing the periods of the cepheids in it. Figured once they got their periods they knew their candlepower. Trouble was they got their candlepower figuring they were Type II cepheids. Didn't discover till 1953 that the only cepheids they could see in Andromeda were all Type I's. But a Type I cepheid is four times brighter'n a Type II with the same period. That meant that Andromeda was just twice as far away as they supposed. So they had to move it out another 750 thousand light years.

SIGHTSEER: 750 thousand light years is a lot of mileage.

GUIDE: That wasn't all of it. They had to double the size of the whole universe! Overnight everything outside the Milky Way got twice as big and twice as far away. That made Andromeda a little bigger'n our galaxy. The Chamber of Commerce didn't like it, but there wasn't anything they could do about it.

SIGHTSEER: (staring fascinated at Delta Cephei, who is beginning to contract): There he goes, squeezing himself up. Gosh, it drives you crazy to think of the cepheids all through space beating away like they were great big hearts. Only I guess they never get fluttery, or develop leaky valves or the angina.

GUIDE: Delta Cephei reminds me of some people you meet. They're all the time bustling around acting as if they were doing something real important that can't wait a minute. They got a drive that never gives 'em any rest. A cepheid's the same way. You might say they just naturally got a passion for pulsation.

CLASSICAL Type I cepheids have some cousins that used to be known as cluster-type variables, but which are generally called RR Lyrae stars today. A star like RR Lyrae presumably pulsates like Delta Cephei, only much faster. They streak up and down their light curve in a matter of minutes rather than days. The RR Lyrae stars are brash young kids with bright shining faces who won't stay put the way they should. You slap them down, and in no time they bounce back again as fresh as ever. You can't do a thing with them. They're simply incorrigible. Oh well, maybe they'll end up as RV Tauri stars, with an irregular period and a long shifty light curve.

In strong contrast to the slavish cepheids are the long-period red variables. They sweep majestically from maximum to maximum with a fine disregard for rules and conventions. Mira is the queen of the long-period variables. She is a moody siren, sulking behind her veil with half-closed eyes. You think she is slumbering down there in Cetus, but watch out: just when you least expect it, she does a big changeover. Suddenly she becomes a sultry enchantress, with a heaving bosom and a mop of flaming red hair floating around her. She pulsates but erratically, with turbulent upheavals in her chromosphere.

Mira is attended by a little hand-maiden who circles meekly around her fiery, tempestuous mistress. She is so retiring that you have to wait until Mira is in one of her dark depressed moods to get a look at her. What a strange pair they are, Mira, the temperamental hellcat, and her pale ghost of a serving maid.

There is a word being used with increasing frequency in astronomy that you would never have found in the literature ten years ago. That word is *population*. Today astronomers speak of the population of this nebula and that, in the same offhand way that we might refer to the people of China or Brazil. For recently they have discovered that

galaxies are populated by different kinds of stars, in somewhat the same sense that countries are populated by different races of people. The two kinds of stellar populations are named simply I and II. Some galaxies consist entirely of one kind of star. For example, the Large Magellanic Cloud is said to be pure Population I. On the other hand, the small elliptical companion of the Andromeda nebula is pure Population II. Andromeda itself, and our own galaxy, are mixed systems containing both Populations I and II. The flat spiral arms are made up of Population I stars, while the dense central nucleus is swarming with stars of Population II. On the whole, the stars of Population II predominate. They extend out from the nucleus like a spray, forming a spherical shell enclosing the whole galaxy and infiltrating, like fifth columnists, in the vacant spaces between the spiral arms.

THE discovery that the universe is composed of two fundamentally different kinds of bodies has cleared up many peculiarities in stellar behavior that were very puzzling before. Previously astronomers were in somewhat the same position as an observer from 61 Cygni C would be, come here to make a survey of social behavior in *genus homos*. He gathers a mass of data, and, upon tabulating it, finds that human beings have some most peculiar traits, which apparently are of some deep significance, but which he cannot comprehend in the slightest degree. Not until someone takes him aside and explains to him that there are two types of human beings—called Men and Women—will his statistics begin to mean anything to him. (Probably a lot of it wouldn't make sense even after it was explained to him.)

Thus, in stellar work, it has always been hard to understand why the white RR Lyrae stars with periods of less than half a day, and the long-period red variables with periods of about 175 days, both have such high space velocities.

Here are two groups of variable stars that seem to be as different as any two stars can be, yet they both have this common property of high velocity. If you encountered two men running madly down the street, you would immediately conclude there was some tieup between them, even though one was an Eskimo and the other a Fiji Islander.

Well, we know now that there is a tie-up between the RR Lyrae stars and the red variables with periods of around 175 days—they both belong to Population II. Their rapid motion is due to the fact that they are revolving around the central nucleus of our galaxy in orbits that are quite different from the sun and its neighbors. (The sun, and practically any star you can see with your unaided eye, belongs to Population I.) They only *seem* to be moving fast relative to us, in the same way that the traffic *seems* to be moving rapidly past a motorist who is driving in the wrong direction down a one-way street.

It would take a long technical article to describe the character traits by which astronomers distinguish between stars of Population I and of Population II. Some stars you can spot at a glance. Others are nondescript individuals that might fit anywhere. The best general criteria are velocity and distance from

the plane of the galaxy. If a star has a high velocity and is far from the plane of the galaxy, you can be pretty sure it is Population II.

Most of the stars whose personalities we have sketched here belong to Population I. The blue-white glamor stars, like S Doradus and Rigel, are the finest examples of Population I. They are "brief candles" whose supply of hydrogen can hardly hold out for more than a few hundred million years, unless they are lucky enough to find a nice fat dust cloud to sustain them. And, curiously enough, most of these glamor stars are found securely imbedded in the dust clouds of the spiral arms, as if they had been born there or were using them for nuclear fuel. Mira is an example of the brightest red star in Population I. She is the envious rival of the glittering blue-white stars. She sulks because she knows she can never hope to outshine them, and occasionally her feelings burst forth in a torrent of jealous rage. The patiently laboring Delta Cephei is also Population I. But RR Lyrae, because of his high velocity, is definitely Population II. He is an alien, despite his innocent appearance—an intruder from outside, who has invaded the space occupied by the little group of stars around the sun.



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In front of Lanarck's eyes, space quivered and wrenched

Planetary secret agent Lanarck had to

get the atom equations — but first he

had to catch the dangerous young lady

THE WORLD-THINKER



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I

THROUGH the open window came the myriad sounds of the city—the swish of passing air-traffic, the soft clank of the pedestrian belt on the ramp below, hoarse undertones from the lower levels. Cardale sat by the window, inattentive to both the noise and the ocean breeze which cooled his face. His eyes stared unseeingly over the ebony desk at the wall opposite. His fingers twitched a sheet of paper, bearing a photograph and a few lines of type.

For the twentieth time, he turned his gaze on it.

FUGITIVE!

Kenna Parker—Age 21; height 5 feet 5 inches; hair, black; eyes, blue; distinguishing characteristics—

He shifted his eyes to the photograph, and looked for the twentieth time at the young face with its incongruously angry eyes. A placard over her head read "94E-627." Cardale returned to the printed words.

Sentenced April 18, 2073, to three years at the Manning, Nevada, Federal Women's Camp. In the first six months of her incarceration Kenna Parker accumulated 22 months of additional punitive confinement. Caution is urged in her apprehension.

a complete novelet by JACK VANCE

Cardale mused upon the face in the photograph. It hardly seemed the face of an incorrigible criminal. A reckless glint in the blue eyes, a whimsical tilt to the eyebrows, a set to the lips—otherwise it was the face of a pretty girl.

He pressed a button. The telescreen plumed into sharp life.

"Lunar Observatory," Cardale said, without looking up.

The view in the ground glass, shifting from the secretary's desk through a whirling many-colored by-play, coagulated to a dim interior view of the Moon Observatory—skeleton trusswork and wide viridian panes. The white-bearded superintendent appeared.

"Good morning, Commissioner," he said.

"Morning, Professor," Cardale replied. "What news?"

"We've lined her out, all right. A nuisance, too. Half a dozen freighters were crossing the sector and blurred up her light trail."

"Well, that's fine. Just keep your sights on her. I'll send an operative out to take over immediately." Cardale clicked off the telescreen.

He ruminated a moment, then once more summoned the image of his secretary. "Major Detering at the Tellurian Corps of Investigation." The polychrome whirl of color rose and fell to reveal Detering's ruddy well-kept face.

"Hello, Cardale," said Detering. "What can I do for you?"

CARDALE leaned back in his chair. "Major, I'd like to borrow one of your men for a few weeks."

"I think we can arrange it," said Detering. He pulled a card index toward him and flicked through it. "Who would you like?"

"Anybody, so long as he's a human wildcat."

"I'll come myself, Commissioner," said Detering.

"Fine, Major," Cardale answered. "Bring your space-gear. You're going out in a one-man space-boat."

Detering winced. Cardale smiled. "I thought you'd change your mind."

"Tell me, Cardale," Detering asked, "do you think I keep a staff of paragons waiting around in the halls?"

Cardale said nothing. The major drummed his fingers a moment, then smiled faintly.

"I've got a good man for you, Cardale. His name's Lanarck, former lieutenant in the Navy Intelligence—a one-man trouble twister. But—" The major paused.

"But what?"

"You may have to humor him. He's a little eccentric."

Cardale leaned back in alarm. "Crazy? Good heavens, man! I can't use a lunatic."

The major laughed. "Oh, don't worry, Cardale. He's a good man and he'll get you results."

"Well, what's wrong with him?"

"Nothing serious, really. He's just a little headstrong, and his ideas of justice aren't always those of the law courts. He's driven me frantic busting into things on his own initiative. He's the fellow who chased the Martian gheegrowers off of Io, and nearly got himself court-martialed."

Cardale was doubtful. "Does it mean that I have to argue and plead with him to carry out my orders?"

The major laughed. "I'll send him over and you can find out for yourself." The telescreen dimmed, leaving Cardale non-plussed and doubtful.

Lieutenant Lanarck arrived almost immediately. The secretary ushered him into Cardale's office.

"Sit down, Lieutenant," Cardale said.

After Lanarck had complied with the request, Cardale inspected him cautiously. He was a bit disappointed to find that Lanarck's reputation was belied by his appearance. He was neither tall nor heavy, and swaggered not at all. His features, deeply darkened by the hard waves of space, were regular almost to unobtrusiveness. Indeed, if it were not for a certain cold directness of the gray

eyes and a bold, jutting nose, Cardale might have thought him plain.

He wore battered and shiny space-harness, undistinguished but for a black and gold sunburst on his helmet—the Tellurian naval insignia. Cardale received a further surprise when Lanarck spoke, for his voice was pleasant and soft.

"Major Detering assigned me to you for orders, sir."

"Yes, he recommended you rather highly," said Cardale. "I have a ticklish job for you, Lieutenant. Here, look at this."

He passed Lanarck the sheet with the photograph of Kenna Parker. Lanarck scrutinized it without comment and handed it back.

"This girl was imprisoned six months ago for assault with a deadly weapon. She escaped the day before yesterday into space, which is more or less trivial in itself. But she had with her documents of the gravest importance. In fact, if they were to fall into the hands of an enemy of the Tellurian Empire, we should be hard put to defend ourselves."

"How is that, sir?" asked Lanarck.

"You're familiar with the techniques of atomic power?"

Lanarck nodded.

"Well, I'm not," Cardale said. "So I can only give you a layman's explanation. But as I understand it, atomic power, destroying ordinary matter, is controlled by four meshing planes of space-warp. That right?"

Lanarck nodded again.

"Now these documents contain equations describing an utterly strange form of energy," Cardale went on. "It is a vibration of the abstract dimension planes themselves. These vibrations, among other things, could shatter the controlling planes of our power generators. So if they were broadcast by an enemy, every power plant in the empire would instantly explode."

"Where, sir, did she obtain these equations?"

"They were a legacy from her father,

who evolved them after long research. The Praesidium offered to purchase them from her, which offer she refused. She claimed that she was planning to destroy them. The Praesidium, however, ordered the seizure of the equations and during the process she wounded three men with a needle-beam. Meanwhile she had hidden the equations, but since her escape, she's had opportunity to regain them."

"What is it you wish me to do?" asked Lanarck in cold tones.

CARDALE glanced at him with the uneasy feeling that Lanarck was weighing the rights and wrongs of the matter.

"Capture the girl, if possible," he told the lieutenant. "But get those equations by hook or crook or any way you like, so long as you get them."

Lanarck stared off through the window for a moment.

"Very well, sir." He arose. "I'll do my best."

Cardale sighed with an irrational relief. At once he became irritated with himself. After all he, Cardale, was the commissioner, and Lanarck the lieutenant.

He told Lanarck what he knew of the girl's whereabouts.

"Well, good luck," he said, as he shook hands with Lanarck. "Be careful. This girl, by all accounts, is a reckless devil."

"Very well, sir," Lanarck replied. He replaced his helmet on his head and took his departure.

Six hours later a 45-G model space-boat slid like a silver tear-drop from the black sky of the Moon. The runway down the Sea of Tears was lighted by white and yellow flood lamps and the nearby hawk-crest of Mount Pelios showed a red and green beacon.

The boat wheeled up to the diaphanous bubble which was the Lunar Observatory. They were awaiting him. The iris expanded, and the boat, with a blue gout of power, lurched through.

Inside the dome, Lanarck unclamped

the port, stepped out. The white-bearded master astronomer approached him. Behind came three mechanics, one of whom bore a small hooded instrument. This they began to weld to the hull of the space-boat. The master astronomer intercepted Lanarck's questioning glance.

"It's a detective cell, and right now it's holding a line on the ship you're to follow. We wire it into your landing beam dial. When the indicator's in the neutral zone, you're on her track. Like landing blind on a radar beam."

Lanarck nodded. "Where does the ship I'm to follow seem to be headed?"

The astronomer shrugged. "Nowhere in Tellurian space," he said. "She's way past Fomalhaut and lining straight out."

Lanarck stood silent and grim. The girl either must be a fool or desperate. This was a hostile space she was entering. In another day or so she'd be slicing the fringe of the Clantlalan System, where the far-flung space patrol of a dark and inimical empire blasted without warning all approaching vessels. Further on opened a region of black stars, inhabited by nondescript peoples little better than pirates. Still farther beyond lay unexplored and consequently dangerous regions.

The mechanics finished. Lanarck climbed back into the boat. The out-iris opened, and with a wave of his hand, he drove the boat through, down the tarp, and off into space.

A slow week followed, a week of unsensed annihilation of distances. The empire fell far astern, a small waning cluster of stars. To one side the Clantlalan System grew ever brighter, and as Lanarck passed by, the sinister Clantlalan space-spheres tried to close with him. But he threw in the emergency bank of generators and whisked the little warboat far ahead.

Some day, Lanarck knew, he would slip down past the guard ships to the home planet by the twin red suns, to see what secret was held so dear. But now he kept the detector centered in the dial.

And day by day, the incoming signals from his quarry grew stronger.

They passed through the out-law-ridden belt of dark stars, and into a region of space unknown but for tales let slip by drunken Clantlalan renegades—tales of planets covered with mighty ruins, legends of a lost asteroid bearing a thousand wrecked space-ships. Other tales, too, wilder and more incredible. A dragon which tore space-ships open in its jaws purportedly wandered through this region, and it was said that alone on a desolate planet dwelt a god-like being who created worlds and civilizations at his pleasure.

Lanarck knew well enough of these tales but was only slightly impressed. Should the dragon pursue him, he would take steps to elude it. His present concern was merely to apprehend a girl.

The signals in the detector cell presently grew so strong that he slackened speed for fear that, overshooting his quarry, the cell would lose its thread of radiation. Now the girl had begun to swerve out toward the star-systems which drifted past like fireflies, as if she sought a landmark. Always the signals in the detector cell grew stronger.

As a great yellow star waxed mighty ahead, Lanarck knew that the ship of Kenna Parker was close at hand. Into that yellow star's system he followed her, and lined out the trail toward the single planet. Presently, as the planet globed out before him, the signals ceased entirely.

LANARCK realized the girl had landed and had cut her blasts. Hastily he lined his telescope at the point the detective cell had last indicated.

The high clear atmosphere braked his motion, and he found below him a dun, sun-baked landscape. Through the telescope, the surface appeared to be uniformly stony and flat, and to be beaten by a high wind.

He had no trouble finding the girl's ship. In the field of his telescope lay a cubical white building, the only land-



Supporting both girls, he continued on toward the temple

mark visible from windy horizon to windy horizon. Beside the building, as he dropped lower, he found Kenna's fluted silver space-boat. He swooped to a landing, half-expecting a bolt from her needle-beam. The port of the space-boat hung open, but she did not show herself as he ground to a halt on his crash-keel close by.

The air, he found, was breathable. Buckling on his needle-beam, he stepped out on the stony ground. The hot gale tore at him, buffeting his face, whipping

tears from his eyes. Wind-flung pebbles bounding along the ground stung his legs. The light from the great sun burned his shoulders.

He inspected the terrain warily. There was no sign of life, either from the white building or from Kenna's space-boat. As he surmised, the girl was not inside her ship. The ground stretched away, utterly bare and sun-drenched, far out into the dusty distances.

Lanarck looked to the lonely white structure. She must be within. **Here**

was the end of the chase which had brought him across the galaxy.

Watchfully he advanced upon the building. Constructed of concrete it was, polished glassy-smooth by the wind. No openings of any sort were visible. Expecting death at any moment, he started to advance.

II

LANARCK circled the building, and on the leeward side found a low, dark archway. From within came the heavy smell of life, but no sound.

If the girl were desperate, for him to enter would be as much as his life was worth. Furthermore there was a half-animal, half-reptilian odor coming from within that kept his finger taut on the trigger—although nothing that could issue through that arch, whether roaring, hissing, or breathing flames, could have surprised Lanarck. He walked forward.

"Kenna Parker!" he called out, and listened.

The wind whistled by the corner of the building and little stones clicked past, blowing down the endless sun-dazzled waste. There was no other sound.

A sonorous voice resounded—but from inside his brain. At least it seemed to emanate from within.

"The one you seek, Earthman, is gone."

Lanarck stood stock-still.

"You may come in, Earthman. We are not enemies."

The archway loomed dark before him and step by step he entered, almost in spite of himself. After the glare of the white sun, the cool dimness of the room was like darkness. Lanarck blinked.

Slowly objects about him assumed form. Before him two enormous eyes peered owlishly through the gloom, while behind loomed a tremendous domelike bulk. Lanarck instinctively leveled his needle-beam at them while the fish-bowl eyes continued to blink at him quizzically. Thought surged into

Lanarck's brain again.

"You are unnecessarily truculent, Earthman. Here there is no occasion for violence."

Lanarck relaxed, slightly at a loss. Telepathy was not often practiced upon Earth, and although the creature's messages sounded in the brain like a clear but paradoxically silent voice, he had no knowledge of how to send forth his own. He hazarded the experiment.

"Where is the Earth-girl?"

"In a place inaccessible to you," presently came the response.

"How did she go? Her space-boat is outside, and she landed but a half-hour ago."

"I sent her."

Lanarck pondered a moment. Then, ostentatiously keeping his needle-beam ready, he searched the building. At last he had to admit that the girl was not in the building. Seized by a sudden fearful thought, he ran to the entrance and peered out. But the two space-boats were still where he had left them. Somewhat self-consciously he shoved the needle-beam back into the holster, and turned to the leviathan in whom he sensed a benign amusement.

"Well, then—who are you, and where is the girl?" Lanarck snapped.

"I am Laoome," came the answer. "Laoome, the one-time Third of Narfilhet—Laoome the World-Thinker, the Final Sage of the Fifth Universe." Laoome rolled his titles off his mental tongue with but half-concealed satisfaction. "As for the girl, I have placed her, at her own request, upon a pleasant but inaccessible planet of my own creation."

Lanarck stood perplexed, tense, suspicious.

"One of the multitude of worlds which I create for my amusement."

Lanarck still could not comprehend.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Look!" Laoome said.

In front of Lanarck's eyes, space quivered and wrenched. A dark aperture appeared in midair. Lanarck, looking through, saw hanging apparently

but a yard before his eyes a lambent sphere—a miniature world. As he watched, it expanded like a toy balloon.

Its horizons vanished past the confines of the opening. Continents and oceans assumed shape, flecked with cloud-wisps. Polar ice-caps glinted blue-white in the light of an unseen sun. Yet all the time the world still seemed to be but a yard distant. A reddish plain appeared, rimmed by flinty black mountains. The color of the plain, a ruddy ocher, he saw presently was due to a forest-carpet of rust-colored foliage. The expansion ceased.

LANARCK shrugged. "Hynotism," he said. Little tendrils of thought probed his mind, as if eager to savor the wonder and awe which should be flooding Lanarck's mind.

"No, no!" the World-Thinker cried. "That which you see before you is matter as real and as tangible as you yourself are. I have indeed created it through my mind. Until I dissolve it in the same manner, it exists—very material indeed. Reach out and touch it."

Lanarck did. It was actually only a yard from his face, and the red forest crushed like dry moss under his fingertip.

"You destroyed a village," commented Laoome.

The world expanded once more at a breathtaking rate, until the perspectives were as if Lanarck hung a hundred feet above the surface. He was looking into the devastation which his fingertip, like some macrocosmic instrument of doom, had wrought a moment before. The trees, far larger than he had supposed, with boles thirty or forty feet through, lay tossed and shattered. Visible were the ruins of rude huts, from which issued curses and screams of pain, thinly audible. Bodies of men and women lay limp and crushed. Others tore frantically at the wreckage.

"Life! Men!"

"Certainly," replied Laoome. "Without life, a world is uninteresting, a lump

of rock. Men, like yourself, I often use. They have infinite capacity for emotion and initiative, a flexibility to the varied environments which I introduce."

"But these men," muttered Lanarck, gazing at the tip of his finger, and back to the shattered village, "they are—alive?"

"Certainly. As alive as you are. And you would find, should you converse with one of them, that they possess a past, a racial heritage of folklore, and a culture well-adapted to their environment."

"But how can one brain conceive the infinite detail of a world? The leaves of each tree, the features of each man—"

"As you imply, that would be tedious," Laoome agreed. "My mind only broadly conceives, introduces the determinate roots into the hypostatic equations. Detail then evolves automatically, in accordance with the natural laws which operate upon these worlds of mine as they do upon your own."

Lanarck was silent, and the muscles of his face were taut.

"Then it would seem that I unwittingly have destroyed hundreds of fellow-beings," he said at last.

Again curious feelers searched his brain.

"So the idea is unpleasant?" asked Laoome, and Lanarck again sensed amusement. "It need not be, for in a moment I shall dissolve the entire world. Still if it pleases you, I can restore it as it was. See!"

As Lanarck looked, the forest was as before, and the village whole again, secure and peaceful in a small clearing.

But Lanarck shook his head, thinking that nothing could obliterate the cataclysm and pain of those few moments.

But now a frightful thing happened. Lanarck first became aware of a curious rigidity in the rapport he had established with the World-Thinker. Looking about, he saw that the great eyes had glazed, that the tremendous black body was twitching and jerking. He took a step backward, and Laoome's dream-planet caught his eye.

Fascinated, he leaned forward. For the noble red trees had become gray rotten stalks, and were swaying drunkenly. Others had slumped and folded like columns of putty.

On the ground balls of black slime rolled about with a vicious life, pursuing the villagers, who in an insane ecstasy of terror fled madly anywhere, everywhere. Lanarck could hear their screams plainly.

Then from the heavens came a rain of blazing white-hot pellets. The men soon were killed, but the black slime-things seemed only agonized. Blindly, furiously, they lashed about, burrowing futilely into the heaving ground to escape the torturing impacts. Suddenly the world vanished. Lanarck slowly tore his fascinated gaze away from the spot where the world had been. He looked about and found Laoome normal once more.

"Don't be alarmed." The thoughts came quietly. "The seizure is over. It occurs once in a great while. Just why it should be I am uncertain myself. I imagine that my brain, under the strain of continuous exact thought, lapses into these spasms of temporary indiscipline as an automatic reflex for the sake of relaxation. This was a mild attack. The world on which I am concentrating is usually totally destroyed."

THE flow of the soundless words were cut off. Laoome seemed to be rearranging his disrupted neuron paths. Lanarck watched curiously. Then, a little hurriedly, as if Laoome were embarrassed, thoughts gushed once more into Lanarck's brain.

"Let me show you another planet—one of the most interesting I have ever conceived. For almost a million Earth years it has been developing in my mind."

The space before Lanarck's eyes quivered open again. Out in the black imaginary void hung another planet.

As before, it expanded until the features of the terrain assumed an earthly

perspective. Hardly a mile in diameter, the world was divided around the equator by a belt of sandy desert. At one pole glimmered a lake, at the other was a jungle of lush vegetation.

From this jungle now, as Lanarck watched, crept a semi-human shape. A travesty upon man, its face was long, chinless, and furtive, its eyes beady and quick. The legs were unnaturally long, but the shoulders and arms were undeveloped. It slunk toward the edge of the desert, paused a moment, looking carefully in both directions, then began a mad dash across.

Halfway over, a terrible roar was heard and, scuttling swiftly over the strangely close horizon, bounded a dragon-like monster. With frightful speed it pursued the fleeing manlike thing who outdistanced it, however, and gained the edge of the desert by two hundred feet. At the limit of the sand, the dragon paused, bellowing an eerily mournful note which sent shivers along Lanarck's spine. Casually now, the man-thing looped to the pond. Throwing himself prone, he drank deeply.

"An experiment in evolution," came Laoome's thought. "A million years ago those creates were men like you. This world is oddly designed. At one end is food, at the other, drink. In order to exist, the creatures must cross the desert every day or so. The dragon living upon the desert is prevented by a radioactive strip at the boundaries from leaving it. Hence, if the men can cross the desert, they are safe.

"You can see how admirably they have responded to their environment. The women are particularly fleet, for they had to adjust themselves to the handicap of caring for their young. Sooner or later, of course, age overtakes them, and their speed gradually decreases until finally they are caught and devoured.

"They have evolved a curious religion and set of tabus. I am worshiped as the primary god of Life, and Shillal, as they call the dragon, is the diety of Death.

He, of course, is the immediate concern of their lives and colors all their thoughts. They are close to elementals, these people. Food, drink, and death are intertwined for them into almost one concept.

"Their world is not endowed with metals, so they can build no weapons against Shillal. Once, many hundred thousand years ago, one of their chiefs contrived a great catapult, to hurl a sharp tree trunk at Shillal. Unluckily, the fibers of the draw-cord snapped and the chief was killed by the recoil. The priests interpreted this as a negative sign and—

"Look! Watch! There Shillal catches an old woman, returning to the jungle sodden with water!"

Lanarck witnessed the beast's great gulping.

"To continue," Laoome went on, "a tabu was created, and no further weapons were ever built."

"But why do you force upon men a million years of this wretched existence?" asked Lanarck.

Laoome gave an untranslatable mental shrug.

"I am just, and indeed benevolent," he said. "These men worship me as a god. Upon a certain hillock, which they hold sacred, they bring their sick and wounded. There, if the whim takes me, I restore them to health. So far as their existence is concerned, they relish the span of their life as much as you do yours."

"Yet in creating these worlds, you are responsible for the happiness of the inhabitants. If you were truly benevolent, why should you permit disease and terror to exist?"

Laoome again gave his mental shrug. "I might say that I have this universe of our own as a model. Perhaps there is another Laoome dreaming out the worlds we ourselves live on. When man dies of sickness, bacteria lives. When dragon lives by eating, man dies. When man eats, plants and animals and sea-life die."

LANARCK shook his head. "You, yourself, admit that man is of higher sensitivity. An accident merely inconvenient to an insect is disaster to man. One of Earth's ancients said, 'Far better that pins prick a million than that a sword be thrust into one.'"

Laoome was amused. "The eternal contest with Shillal adds zest to their lives. It makes their food and drink, when they attain it safely, more desirable."

Lanarck was silent, studiously preventing his thoughts from rising to the surface of his mind.

"I take it that the Earth-girl is upon neither of these planets?" he finally said.

"That is correct."

"Then I ask that you make it possible for me to communicate with her."

"But I put her upon this world expressly to assure her safety from any such molestation," came the quizzical thoughts of Laoome.

Lanarck moved impatiently. "I represent the justice of the Tellurian Empire. This is a power more cogent than the wishes of an individual."

"The justice of the Tellurian Empire is not the justice of Laoome—and Earth is farther away," the World-Thinker pointed out. "I see no reason to annoy this girl merely to gratify you and the justice of Earth. A moment ago you made use of the aphorism, 'Better that pins prick a million than that a sword be thrust into one.' The appeasement of Earth justice would be nothing compared to the acuteness of the girl's distress should she be taken back to Earth."

"She wounded three men who were doing their duty," answered Lanarck. "More important, she is in a position to destroy the civilization of Earth. But my mission is not primarily to punish her or liquidate her menace violently. I believe that the girl would profit by hearing me."

For a moment Laoome hesitated, his saucer eyes staring fixedly.

"Very well then," he said then. "In justice I should accord to you as an individual, the same privileges that I did her. You may proceed to this world. You will be upon your own resources, however, exactly as she is. If you perish upon Markavvel, you are as thoroughly dead as you would be upon Earth. I will not play Destiny to influence either one of you."

There was a hiatus in Laoome's thoughts, a whirl of ideas too rapid for Lanarck to grasp.

Lanarck stood watching, half-suspiciously. At last Laoome's eyes focused upon him again. They seemed to glare. An instant of faintness passed over Lanarck. He felt knowledge forced into his brain.

Laoome silently and thoughtfully regarded him. It occurred to Lanarck that Laoome's body, a great dome of black flesh, was singularly ill-adapted to life on the planet where he dwelt.

"No," softly came the thoughts of Laoome. "From a Beyond unknown to you I came, banished from the dark planet Narfilhet, in whose fathomless black waters I swam. This was long ago, but even now I may not return." Laoome absently-mindedly lapsed once more into introspection.

Lanarck moved restlessly. Outside the wind tore past the building, pushed fiercely across the endless desert. Laoome lay inert, dreaming perhaps of the dark oceans of mighty Narfilhet. Lanarck lost patience and launched a thought.

"How do I reach Markavvel? And how do I return?"

Laoome came back to the present. His eyes settled upon a point beside Lanarck. The aperture which led into his various imaginary spaces was now wrenched open for the third time. A little distance off in the void, a space-boat floated. Lanarck's eyes narrowed with sudden interest.

"That's a forty-five-G—my own ship!" he exclaimed.

"No, not yours. One like it. Yours is

still outside."

The ship drifted closer, gradually floated within reach.

"Climb in," said Laoome. "At present the girl you seek is in the city which lies at the apex of the triangular continent."

"But how do I get back?" demanded the practical Lanarck.

"Aim your ship, when you leave Markavvel, at the brightest star visible. You will then break through the mental dimensions into this universe."

Lanarck reached his arm into the imaginary universe and pulled the imagined space-boat close to the aperture. He opened the port and gingerly stepped in. Laoome's last thoughts reached him.

"Remember should you fall into danger, I can not modify the natural course of events. On the other hand, I will not intentionally place dangers in your way. If such befall you, it will be due purely to circumstances."

III

AS LANARCK slammed shut the port, he half-expected the ship to dissolve below him. But it was solid enough. He looked back. The gap into his own universe had disappeared, leaving in its place a brilliant blue star. He found himself in space. Below him glittered the lucent disk of Markavvel, seemingly like the other planets he had approached from the void. His mind paused, reluctant to believe that this universe was but a dream in another's imagination.

Then he shrugged. He knew where his work lay. Let the abstracts care for themselves. He tugged at the throttle, threw the nose hard over and down. Gushing atoms, the boat hurtled down at Markavvel.

It seemed a pleasant world. A hot white sun hung off in space and blue oceans covered a large part of the surface. Among the scattered land masses he quickly found the triangular continent to which Laoome had referred.

It was not large. A plateau jutted up

in the interior, with mountains whose upper slopes were covered with green forests. It was a very Earthlike sight, and Lanark did not feel the alien aura which surrounded most extra-terrestrial planets.

He found the city through his telescope, sprawling and white at the mouth of a wide river. He pointed his ship downward, sending it streaking through the upper atmosphere. Then he slowed up and leveled off thirty miles to sea. Barely skimming the sparkling blue waves now, he flew in toward the city.

A few miles distant to his left, an island raised basalt bulwarks against the ocean, and in his line of sight, as he looked, there heaved up on the crest of a swell, a floating black object. After an instant it disappeared into the trough, but Lanark had flung his ship about, and already was almost there.

It was a ramshackle raft. Upon it a girl with wild golden hair was desperately battling things, vaguely human, which were seeking to climb aboard.

Lanark breasted the ship into the water beside the raft. The wash caught under, threw the raft up and over, then down on the girl.

Lanark cursed, hurriedly slipped through the port and dived into the clear green water. For an instant he glimpsed sub-human figures paddling down into the indistinctness below. Then he bobbed to the surface. Quick strokes took him to the raft.

Ducking under, he grasped the limp form of the girl and pulled her free into the air.

For a moment he clung to the raft to catch his breath, as he held the girl's head clear of the bright green water. Soon he sensed the return of the creatures in the water. Dark forms rose in the shadow cast by the raft, and a clammy, long-fingered hand wound around his ankle. He kicked and felt his foot thud into something like a face. Other dark forms were rising from the depths below. He measured the distance to the floating space-boat. Forty

feet. Too far. He crawled up on the raft, and pulled the girl after him.

Her rude paddle bobbed in the water close by. Leaning far out, he recovered it, and prepared to smash the first sea-thing that dared to push above water. But none rose. Instead, some of them swam in tireless circles, twenty feet below.

The blade of the paddle had broken, and to Lanarck's disgust, he found that he could not move the unwieldy bulk of the raft. The breeze, meanwhile, was easing the space-boat ever farther from him. Lanarck redoubled his efforts, but the distance widened. After fifteen minutes of ineffectual struggle with the splintered paddle, he cast it down, and gazed sourly across at his space boat, now two hundred feet away.

He turned to the girl, who was sitting cross-legged, regarding him thoughtfully. Lanarck, as he faced the girl on the raft, for no conceivable reason, thought of Laoome in the dimness of his white building on the windy world. All this, thought Lanarck, looking from the clear-eyed girl to heaving sun-lighted sea and highlands of the continent ahead, was an idea in that inscrutable brain.

He looked back at the girl. She had bright wheat-colored hair, pulled back from her brow and frothing behind her head in ringlets. Her face was beautiful and she had honest blue eyes. She stared at him for a moment, then stood up, rising with a jaunty face.

STILL smiling, she spoke to Lanarck in an alien tongue. Her voice was low and pleasant. It amazed Lanarck to find that he understood her, until he remembered how Lagoome's eyes had seemed to pierce him, taking things away from his brain, and putting things back.

"I thank you, my friend," she said. "But now, as you see, we're both in the plight I was in before you rescued me."

Lanarck said nothing. He knelt and began to remove his sandals.

"What will you do?" she asked.

"Swim," he answered. The language seemed natural to him.

"That's suicide. The Bottom-people would pull you under before you covered twenty feet. See?"

She pointed into the water, and there Lanarck saw enough dark shapes circling below, gazing upward with vague gray faces to show he had best heed her advice.

"You are of Earth also?" she asked, inspecting him carefully.

"Yes," he answered, giving her a curious look. "Who are you, and what do you know of Earth?"

"I'm Norji, of Nathol, the city yonder. Earth is the home of Kenna Parker, who came in a ship such as yours."

Lanarck sat still in amazement. "But Kenna Parker arrived here not more than an hour ago. How could you know about her?"

"Hour?" replied the girl, puzzled in her turn. "She has been there three months." This last a little bitterly.

Lanarck scratched his head in perplexity. Laoome apparently controlled the time coordinates in his universes as arbitrarily as he did the spatial.

"How did you get out here on this raft?" he asked.

She shuddered and grimaced toward the island.

"The priests," she said. "The Ordained Ones. They live on the island and take people from the mainland— young women mostly; sometimes men. They took me, but I fled last night."

Lanarck looked from the island to the great towered city on the mainland.

"Why doesn't the city send an armed force and destroy them?"

"No." Her red lips rounded to an O. "They are sacred, sacred to Almighty Laoome."

"Laoome! And what do you know of Laoome?"

"Laoome? Laoome is the All-Powerful, the Creator."

"So!" said Lanarck. He smiled grimly. "And these island marauders are sacred, eh?"

"They are priests—inviolable."

"Why is that?" asked Lanarck. Sardonicly he was wondering what novel type of evolutionary process Laoome had in progress here. Her words confirmed his suspicions.

"I don't know," she said, slightly puzzled. "I don't believe anyone knows. It's a tradition from the ancient times. However, mortals who are taken to the island are henceforth tabu and may not again become members of ordinary human society."

"What do they do, then?" he wanted to know.

"Very few ever return to the mainland. Those who do win free from the Ordained Ones and escape the Bottom-people usually live in the wilderness. If they return to Nathol they are sometimes molested by fanatics, sometimes recaptured by the priests."

Lanarck fell silent. After all, it concerned him little how these people fared, being of sheerest fantasy, inhabiting an imaginary planet. And yet—

He looked at Norji, and shook his dark head.

"And Kenna Parker, then, is in Nathol?"

Norji's lips tightened. "No," she answered. "She lives on the island. She is the Thrice-Adept, the High Priestess."

Lanarck was genuinely startled. "High Priestess? Kenna Parker?"

Norji looked at him gloomily.

"Why is that so strange?" she asked, and Lanarck recalled Cardale and Kenna Parker's record in the Woman's Camp at Manning.

"But why did they make her High Priestess?"

"A month after she arrived, the Hierarch, learning of the woman whose hair was the color of night, even as yours, tried to take her to Drefteli, the Sacred Isle, as a slave. She slew him with her hand-weapon. Then when the lightnings of Laoome did not descend and consume her, it was known that Laoome

approved, and so she was made High Priestess in place of the riven Hierarch."

LANARCK grinned at the naive philosophy. Yet, he reflected, it would have sounded much more primitive on Earth, where the gods were more covert in their supervision of mundane affairs.

"Is Kenna perhaps a friend of yours—or you her lover?" asked Norji softly.

"Hardly," replied Lanarck, smiling in his stern way.

"Then what do you want with her?"

"I've come to take her back to Earth," he answered, looking dubiously across the ever-widening gap between the tossing raft and his space-boat. "Her presence is—desired."

"She may not wish to go," said Norji.

Lanarck shrugged, which might mean anything. Norji scowled, but Lanarck's dark, impassive face remained uncommunicative.

"You shall see your—Kenna Parker—shortly," said Norji, finally breaking the silence.

Lanarck, looking about, saw approaching them from the island a long black galley.

"The Ordained Ones," said Norji. "I am once more a slave."

"Not yet," said Lanarck, feeling for the bulk of his needle-beam.

The galley, swirled forward by twenty long oars, lunged toward them, and now the features of a woman standing in the stern were plain to see. She was young, with an intrepid poise of her head.

Long black hair played behind her in the wind. In his mind's eyes, Lanarck contrasted her features with the angry, defiant face of Cardale's photograph. Now Kenna Parker, looking from the silent two on the raft to the wallowing space-boat a quarter-mile distant, laughed joyously.

The galley, manned by tall, golden-haired men, drew alongside.

"So the Tellurian Corps of Investiga-

tion pays me a visit?" she said in English. "You've found me, all right. How you did it, I don't know." She looked at Lanarck's somber visage curiously. "How?"

"Detective cell, and an explanation of the situation to Laoome."

"Just what is the situation?"

"The Council offers you amnesty and the cash sum previously mentioned in exchange for the documents which you possess."

"Yes?"

"The alternative is unpleasant, but quick."

Kenna laughed again. Lanarck knit his brows. Something about her which he could not identify was familiar to him. It was not the photograph. Lanarck considered the women he had encountered in his life, and still was at a loss.

Kenna composed herself.

"Well, anyway, you're not dull, Lieutenant," she said, noting the insignia on his helmet. "What's your name?"

"Lanarck."

She lifted her black eyebrows. "Lanarck? I've heard of you. The maniac of Arminzd, wasn't it? The great Lanarck. I'm flattered." She gazed about the horizon. "Well, Lieutenant, I hardly know what to do with you. I'm not vindictive, and I'd hate to—well, handicap your career. But ferrying you to your space-boat would be rather quixotic. I'm comfortable here, and I haven't the slightest intention of turning my property over to you."

Lanarck woodenly reached for his needle-beam.

She watched him mockingly.

"It's quite wet, Lieutenant, and we both know that wet needle-beams don't work well for several days."

Lanarck permitted himself to grin as he blasted the figurehead from the galley. Kenna's expression changed suddenly.

"Well," she said, "I shoved in the wrong relay that time. How do you do it?"

"A personal device," replied Lanarck. "Now I'll have to request you to take me to my space-boat."

Kenna stared at him enigmatically a moment, and in those blue eyes Lanarck again detected something familiar. Where had he seen eyes with that expression? On Fan, the Pleasure Planet? In the Magic Groves of Hycithil? During the raids on the slave-pens of Starlen? In Earth's own macropolis Tran?

She turned and muttered rapidly to her steward, who was standing beside her. He bowed and moved away. He was a bronzed giant, his golden hair bound back by a copper band.

"Very well," she called. "Come aboard."

NORJI and Lanarck clambered over the carven gunwale. The galley swept ahead, foaming up white wake behind.

"And who, may I ask, is this girl?" Kenna asked and observed, "You make friends quickly and in good taste, Lieutenant."

"She's one of your escaped slaves," Lanarck replied sardonically. "I suppose you'll wish to throw her in chains?"

"Oh, no. You can have her. As a matter of fact, I'm gradually instituting reforms. Although why, I don't know. This is Laoome's world, not mine."

"I'll have to ask you to turn over those equations," said Lanarck.

"In the first place," replied Kenna, "I don't carry them with me. In the second place you couldn't have them if I did."

Lanarck reached out long arms and methodically searched her, unsuccessfully.

"I suppose you haven't swallowed them?"

Kenna flushed. "No."

"Well I won't look," said Lanarck, with a sour grin.

This girl was exceptionally attractive and he found it difficult to take his eyes from her. But as he settled himself on the bench beside Norji, he felt a surge

of a different and stranger feeling. It irritated him, and he tried to put it aside.

IV

WALLOWING heavily in the swells, the space-boat now lay dead ahead. The galley scudded through the water at a great rate, and the oarsmen did not slacken speed as they approached. Lanarck's eyes narrowed, and he jumped upright shouting orders. But, unswerving, the galley on the next instant plowed into the space-boat, grinding it under the metal-shod keel.

Water gushed in through the open port. The space-boat shuddered and sank, a dark shadow plummeting into green depths.

"I'm sincerely sorry," remarked Kenna evenly. "But this puts us more on an equal footing. You have a needle-beam. I have a space-boat."

Lanarck silently seated himself. After a moment he spoke.

"Where is your own needle-beam?"

"Blew the pulsator line recharging it from the space-boat generators."

Lanarck moved his shoulders.

"You're an intelligent woman," he said. "Eventually you'll wish to return to Earth. You'll never have a better opportunity than right now. Place those equations in my custody—I'll show you my credentials—and the manslaughter and jailbreak charges will be lifted. Then you'll find yourself a rich woman."

"And if I don't?" Kenna asked softly.

Lanarck remained silent a moment. "You will return to Earth anyway, dead or alive."

Kenna looked away to the horizon.

"Laoome would not permit violence to me."

Lanarck shrugged.

The galley, meanwhile, had swung about and was making toward the island.

"Where, by the way, is your space-boat?" asked Lanarck.

Kenna laughed. "Do you expect me

to tell you?"

"Why not? I have no reason to maroon you here."

"Nevertheless, I don't think I'll tell you."

"Norji, where is Kenna Parker's space-boat?" Lanarck asked.

"Norji," Kenna snapped. "As the High Priestess to Almighty Laoome, I command you to be silent!"

The blond girl of Nathol looked in bewilderment from one to the other. She made up her mind.

"It's on the plaza of the Malachite Temple in Nathol," she said, with fatalistic philosophy.

Kenna was silent, obviously angry. "Laoome plays tricks," she said at last. "This girl likes you. You like her."

"Laoome will not interfere," said Lanarck.

She laughed bitterly. "That's what he told me—and look! I'm High Priestess. He also told me he wouldn't let anyone come to Markavvel from the outside to molest me. The next thing, you show up!"

"I don't intend to molest you," Lanarck told her curtly. "Allow me to do my duty and I'll gladly depart. We can as easily be friends as enemies."

"But I don't care to be a friend of yours, and as an enemy, you're no serious problem." The tall bronzed steward was then passing. "Now!" said Kenna.

Like a tiger the steward whirled on Lanarck. But Lanarck was not caught unaware. The man of Markavvel was six inches taller and fifty pounds heavier than he, but Lanarck resignedly twisted and squirmed until he secured a grip he had learned in the rough-and-tumble experience of a naval investigator. He heaved, and the golden-haired steward sprawled back, thudded into the boat's black-ribbed bilge, where he lay still.

But a soft hand brushed Lanarck's thigh, and he found himself bereft of his needle-beam. He looked up, smoothing his lank black hair, and found Kenna smiling into his face. The needle-beam

dangled from her finger.

Norji arose from the bench where she had been watching, wide-eyed. Before Kenna quite understood, Norji put a hand flat on her face and pushed, seizing the needle-beam with the other hand. She pointed the weapon at Kenna.

"Sit down," Norji said.

Kenna fell back upon the bench, almost weeping with rage. Norji, her young face flushed and happy, backed over to the thwart, the needle-beam leveled.

Lanarck stood still.

"I'll take charge for awhile now," remarked Norji. "Everyone else seems to have tried it, and all we did was row in circles. I'm not going to be polite either. You—Kenna Parker! Tell your men to row toward Nathol!"

SULLENLY Kenna gave the signal. Water swirled under the oars and the long black galley turned its bow toward Nathol.

"This may be sacrilege," Norji observed delightedly to Lanarck. "She's the High Priestess, you know. But then I was already sacrilegious for escaping from Drefteii."

"What are your plans, in this new capacity of yours?" Lanarck inquired, moving the smallest bit closer.

"First, to try this weapon on whoever thinks he can take it away from me." Lanarck moved back again. "Second—but you'll see soon enough."

White-tiered Nathol was rapidly drawing closer across the water.

Kenna sulked on the bench. Lanarck, letting matters move on their own momentum for the while, since each oar-stroke was taking him closer to Kenna's space-boat, relaxed in the sun against a thwart, watching Norji from the corner of his eye.

Norji stood erect, behind the bench where Kenna sat, her clear blue eyes looking over the leaping blue sparkles of the ocean. The breeze whipped her hair behind and pressed the tunic against her slim body. Lanarck shook his head.

This vital girl with the windy, wheat-colored hair—she was unreal. She would vanish into nothingness as soon as Laoome willed. She was less than a shadow, less than a mirage, less than a dream. She was mind-stuff. Lanarck looked over at Kenna, the Earth-girl, but with her angry red lips and sullen eyes she gave him no help.

They were plowing up the wide river, and the long white docks of Nathol were close at hand. Lanarck stretched and stood up. Perhaps Norji would be unable to handle Kenna and the entire crew in the confusion of warping the galley in. He looked over the city a moment, surveyed the crowds on the dock, clad in white and red and blue tunics. Soon he turned to Norji.

"I'll have to take the needle-beam now, Norji," he said quietly. "It's my duty—both to you and my job."

"You stand back or I'll—" Norji muttered between clenched teeth.

Lanarck walked over to her, sardonically expressionless. She let her arms fall. Unresisted, he took the needle-beam. He put an arm about her and squeezed.

"You're safe," he said. "I'll make Kenna restore you to your position in the city." She only wept softly against his arm.

Lanarck moved uneasily. His brain whirled through wild thoughts—thoughts of Earth, thoughts of Laoome, but mostly thoughts of Norji. His arm squeezed her warm young shoulders. Unreal, he muttered, fantasy. He cursed Laoome.

"Norji." The words came hard from his tight lips, and his dark face flushed. "As long as you need any help, I'll stay on Markavvel. I'll give Kenna a dose of somnol and the Council can wait for its equations. Heaven knows you're more human and more real than she is, in spite of Laoome."

Norji stopped crying, and began to laugh. Lanarck sighed and dropped his arm. She put a hand on his shoulder and modestly kissed his cheek.

Kenna was watching amusedly, obviously planning a tart comment. But Lanarck's attention had been distracted. He moved away, and very alert, scanned the sky. He listened.

A dull enormous throbbing, like the pulse of a tremendous heart, came down from the heavens. At the horizon appeared a strange cloud, like a band of white-gleaming metal, swelling in rhythm to the celestial throbbing. It lengthened with miraculous speed until in all directions the horizon was encircled. The throb became a vast booming.

A terrible idea startled Lanarck. The air itself seemed heavy, taut. He turned and yelled to the awe-struck oarsmen who aghast, were trailing their oars in the river.

"Quick—into shore!"

They jerked at their oars, straining frantically with every ounce of their magnificent golden bodies. Yet the galley, to Lanarck's appraising eyes, seemed to move no faster. The sea had become oily smooth, and the water seemed syrupy. The boat began to lose headway.

The docks, however, were close at hand, great concrete piers bulking sturdily into the water. Lanarck, grim on the afterdeck, became aware of the terrified Kenna on one side of him, and Norji on the other.

"What is happening?" Kenna whispered hoarsely.

Lanarck was watching the sky. The cincturing cloud-band of bright metal quivered and split into another which wobbled, bouncing, just above.

"I hope—I hope I'm wrong," muttered Lanarck.

"How?" breathed Norji.

NOW Lanarck saw his shadow. He turned his head to the sun and knew that his worst fears were realized. The sun was jerking unbelievably, vibrating through aimless arcs.

"It's Laoome," he said. "Laoome has gone mad."

"It can't be!" cried Kenna. "What

will happen?"

Cleaving the thickened water, plowing up furrows of white froth-jelly, the galley lurched against a wharf. Lanarck tossed Kenna and Norji up on shore and followed.

They hesitated. Into the lordly avenue, stretching away through the city, milled panicky masses of tall, golden-haired people. The booming from the sky increased the rapidity of its world-spanning beat.

"Where is the space-boat?" Lanarck had to raise his voice to make himself heard over the tumult. But his mind was frozen by a shocking thought. What would happen to Norji? Made of dream-stuff, she'd—

He pushed the thought down. Kenna was pulling at him urgently.

Grabbing Norji's hand, he helped her off after Kenna, who was making for the black-porticoed temple at the far end of the avenue.

Lanarck still watched the sky. Why, he could not have told. The sky perhaps seemed closest to Laoome, the hemisphere least protected. Then from the sky came Laoome's next mad creation. A sudden constriction in the air, a soundless pulse, and floating down came rains of warm red globules, like small crimson jellyfish, stinging naked flesh like nettles. The din from the city, hoarse shouts and screams, grew frightening.

The red plasms increased their numbers in a fury, became an opaque cloud of pink slime until the ground was ankle-deep with squirming red ooze.

Wherever one turned, there was no escaping the flood of red things. They were underfoot and underhand everywhere. Walking was now a perilous effort. The sticky, noisesome mess covered everything in sight, dripping, sliding.

Kenna slipped and fell headlong. She struggled, and slid futilely until Lanarck helped her up. Supporting both girls, he continued toward the temple. Upon the structures of Nathol to either side,

he kept an anxious eye, dreading lest Markavvel itself begin to break down before they reached the space-boat.

The rain of red things ceased, but the streets were buried under a foot of carmine ooze. Now the sky was a different color, a new color which had no place in any spectrum. It was a color only a mad god could invent.

Suddenly the red slime curdled, then fell apart like spilt quicksilver, to jell in an instant to million upon millions of bright blue manikins three inches high. They ran, they scuttled, they hopped, and the streets were a quaking blue carpet of faceless little baroques. The Natholians trod them under, unheeding. They clung to Lanarck's garments, they ran up his legs like mice.

The sun, still jerking aimlessly in small spasmodic motions, slowed, seemed to lose its glare, then seemed to become oblate. It developed striations and, as the stricken population of Nathol quieted in awe, the sun changed to a segmented white slug.

"What next? Lanarck thought, shaking blue manlets into the street.

The sky-slug, as long as five suns, as wide as one, writhed its head about with a horribly blind, yet somehow purposeful motion.

Then it wormed down the strange-colored sky at Markavvel.

In the delirium of utter panic, the people of Nathol careened through their wide white avenues. Indeed, as Lanarck and the two girls fought past a cross street, the crazed mob almost trod them under.

Beside a marble fountain the three found refuge. Lanarck's brain relaxed into a state of detachment, a conviction that this experience was but a fantasy, a nightmare. It was too grotesque, too unnatural that he, Lanarck, lieutenant of the Tellurian Corps of Investigation, should be battling a way through frenzied dream-people for two girls, one herself a phantom. All this he was doing in order to win clear of a disrupting thought in an insane brain.

A BLUE man-thing pulled itself into his hair. It was singing in a small clear baritone. Lanarck dashed it to the ground. No! His mind grew calmer. This was reality. Also there was need for haste. He saw that the frantic surge of people had passed and that the streets were again relatively open.

"Let's go," he muttered to the two girls who, silent but pale, had been watching the Titanic slug which hung monstrosously across the sky.

But as they started off, there came the metamorphosis Lanarck had been dreading. The matter of Nathol, of all Markavvel, altered into insane unnatural substances.

Up to now, Lanarck had been hoping against hope. But at last he was realizing no hope remained but the space-boat. The stately buildings of Nathol, crisp white marble, had become putty, slumped beneath their own weight. Lanarck had fixed well in mind the situation of Malachite Temple while it still existed as an airy dome on green malachite pillars. Now it was a sodden lump.

Lanarck pulled the stumbling girls to even greater speed.

V

HORRIFIED, the people of Nathol stood staring up, frozen in fascinated horror by the glittering slug in the sky. Lanarck was keeping an anxious eye on these people, dreading lest they also, as dream-creatures, alter to shocking half-things. For should they change, so also would Norji change, he knew.

His ideas for taking her to the space-boat were confused. He had no reason to believe that she could exist outside her native dream-universe, even if the space-boat already had not altered to anomalous pulp.

Still the face of Markavvel continued to remold itself. Horny black pyramids sprouted through the ground and, lengthening tremendously, darted far up to become vicious black spikes, miles high.

Lanarck could see the space-boat. Apparently it was still sound and whole. It had been formed from more durable mind-stuff, perhaps, than Markavvel itself.

He sensed tremendous processes transpiring beneath his feet, as if the core of the planet itself were degenerating into inchoate stickiness. Anxiously he eyed the hundred yards to the space-boat and, by an effort, withdrew his gaze. "Faster!" he panted.

The two girls, already sobbing for breath, desperately struggled forward. All the while Lanarck watched the Natholians. At last, like a cold wind blowing on his brain, he knew the change had come. His eyes had not told him. It was something deeper. He almost slowed his steps in despair. The Natholians themselves knew. They staggered in wild and unbelieving surmise, regarding their hands, feeling their faces.

Too late! Lanarck cursed passionately. Unreasonably he had believed that once in space, away from Markavvel, the girl would be safe. But the space-boat was still far off.

Too late it was indeed. A blight had fallen upon the Natholians. Frantically they clawed their shriveling faces, tottered and fell, screeching thinly, their shrunken legs unable to support them.

Simultaneously, Lanarck in strange anguish felt one of the hands he was holding become hard and wrinkled. As Norji's legs withered, he felt her sag into the muck. He paused and, drawn against his will, turned to look upon what had been Norji.

Now the ground beneath his feet was lurching, around him groveled dying Natholians, and above, dropping through the weird sky, came the colossal slug. Black chitinous spikes towered tremendously over his head. Lanarck heeded none of these. Before him stood Norji—a Norji gasping and reeling in exhaustion, but a Norji lithe and golden still! Dying in the slime was the shriveled

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"They're Not Telling You
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dream-thing he had known as Kenna Parker.

Lanarck's eyes suddenly narrowed. He ripped the tunic away from Norji's shoulder. One glance was enough. Tattooed in blue-black on the bareness were the symbols 94E-627. An instant he stood there, his lips hard and tight. Then, seizing her hand once more, he turned and made for the space-boat.

Halfway there, the air congealed into thin swirling liquid, and their way was made much more difficult. Finally, however, they attained the space-boat, Lanarck himself gasping.

Hauling back the port, he pushed the dazed girl inside and followed. But as his hands touched the hull, he realized with a dull feeling of helplessness that the space-boat was changing also. The cold metal had acquired a palpitant life of its own.

They were doomed—doomed to suffocate in a collapsing universe!

Lanarck brushed the idea aside. He slammed shut the port and, heedless of fracturing cold thrust-tubes, gushed power astern.

Off careened the space-boat, away from Markavvel, Lanarck with clenched jaw, weaving the ship madly through the forest of glittering black spines, now hundreds of miles tall.

They flung out into free space. Plunging down almost upon them was the great white sky-slug, and Lanarck frantically swerved a thousand miles to escape. Once, when he looked back, he saw the slug descending upon the planet, sprawling its tremendous bulk over half a hemisphere. The tall black spikes pierced it. In helpless pain it writhed, impaled on hundreds of mighty black shafts.

THEY were in space. Lanarck found his landmark star and blasted at it full speed. Blue and luminous it shone, the only steadfast object in the heavens. All else, stars, nebulae, poured in turbulent streams through black space, like motes eddying in a pool of ink—a thing

of frenzy in a normal universe, but Lanarck now would have been surprised by nothing.

He looked briefly at Norji and spoke in curt tones.

"She who appeared to be Kenna was a dream-thing and you, the dream-thing, live."

The girl bowed her head. Her clean, light hair dropped forward. She raised her head.

"I am Kenna Parker. You knew already."

Lanarck had known already. But he had known it only since he had seen the prison identification tattooed on her shoulder.

"What are you going to do with me?" she asked quietly.

Lanarck did not answer immediately. It required almost hypnotic attention to keep the space-boat at the one steadfast star in this sky of weaving constellations.

"If we escape from this mess, it'll be a miracle," he said shortly.

He put his hand speculatively against the hull. All of the impersonal metallic feel was gone. It was warm. He sensed a vitality.

Inside the ship changes were going on. The controls atrophied completely and the ports became dull and opaque, like cartilage. The engines and fittings became whitish, voluted organs, while the walls were pink moist flesh, pulsing regularly. From outside came a distinct and steady booming like gigantic flapping pinions, and about their feet, oozing from the floor, swirled a dark viscous liquid.

Lanarck, pale, shook his head. The girl pressed close to him.

"Lost—we're lost," he muttered. "We are in the stomach of some reptile."

She made no answer. She only pressed her forehead mutely against his shoulder. Silent, enveloped in utter darkness, they stood together, the ichor lapping their knees.

A sound like a cork snapped from a bottle, a gush of gray light. Lanarck

had guided the space-boat aright, and as a living weir-thing, it had continued dumbly into the sane universe and its own destruction.

The two bewildered Earth-creatures found themselves stumbling on the floor of Laoome's dwelling. At first they could not comprehend. So habitual had become madness that their apparent deliverance seemed but another miasmic shifting of scenes.

Lanarck regained his mental equilibrium. He helped the girl, who had fallen, to rise, but now there was little gentleness in his grip. As abruptly as their escape from chaos, he was again Lieutenant Lanarck, of the Tellurian Corps of Investigation, on special duty. The girl darted a quick comprehending glance at him.

Together they surveyed Laoome, who was still in the midst of his spasm. Rippling tremors ran along his shiny black hide, and his saucer eyes were blank and glazed.

"Let's go!" the girl whispered urgently.

Lanarck paused a moment, then silently took her arm and they stepped out on the glaring wind-whipped flat. The girl's tunic fluttered fiercely and her long hair blew out.

On the hot barrenness, as they had left them, were the two space-boats. Lanarck put the girl into the 45-G, but did not follow.

"I'm going back to see Laoome for a minute," he said, unobtrusively reaching in and locking the power-arm.

She said nothing but, a little hurt, watched him battling the wind across the flat to the white concrete structure. She listened, but the moaning of the wind drowned out all else.

What was that? The chatter of a needle-beam? She could not be sure.

Presently Lanarck emerged once more. He strode over to the boat, climbed in and slammed the port. They sat in silence as the thrust-tubes warmed, nor did they speak as he threw hard over the power-arm, and the ship

lashed down the waste and off on a slant. Not until they were far off in space did either of them speak. Then Lanarck turned his head to the girl.

"How did you know of Laoome?"

"Through my father," Kenna Parker said. "Twenty years ago Father did Laoome some trifling favor—killed an insect which had been annoying Laoome, I think."

LANARCK LAUGHED. Eagerly the girl smiled, hoping his mood would become less stern.

"And that's why Laoome shielded you from me by creating the dream Kenna Parker?"

"Yes. He told me you were coming down looking for me, not as a fugitive from justice, but as a—well, anyway, he arranged that you should meet this false Kenna in my presence, that I might judge you."

"Why don't you look more like the photograph?"

"When Laoome told me you were coming down, he created a surgeon who changed my face a little."

"And your hair?" he asked.

"Out of a bottle. Like it?"

Lanarck eyed her quizzically. "Kenna with the dark hair was attractive."

Her lips tightened at the corners.

"She seemed to find you fetching, too," Kenna replied, and there was an odd overtone in her voice. "I could tell."

Lanarck chuckled and unbent a little. "Don't fret. She's only yourself." Another thought struck him. "Did she know who you were?"

"I don't think so. No, I know she didn't. Laoome equipped her with my brain, and all its memories. She actually was I."

Lanarck nodded. It had become clear to him where those inklings of quasi-recognition in his brain had originated.

For a period they continued to race through space in silence back toward Earth. Finally Lanarck spoke again.

"I'd better take those equations."

He felt her tighten, then suddenly re-

lax. She reached into a pocket in her tunic, withdrew a packet. Then, before Lanarck could intervene she burnt them to crisp ashes with his needle-beam.

He had flung his arm out, but not in time. He looked at her, expressionless except for a dull smolder in his eyes. She laughed.

"I'd have done that years ago, if the Council hadn't been so—so smug. I was merely tantalizing them."

"Did that six months at Manning tantalize them?" Lanarck jeered.

She flushed. "You'd be annoyed, too, if three drunken old ward-healers came to arrest you at six o'clock in the morning." She paused. "Although I was sorry afterward."

"How do I know that those were the equations?" Lanarck asked.

"I give you my word they were."

Lanarck shrugged. He was not overly concerned. If she had destroyed the equations, as he believed she had, well enough. If not, and she hoped to deceive him, he would find out before they returned to Earth.

So again they rode in silence. Black space swirled astern, cut only by shearing energy-trails from the thrust-tubes. A star to one side grew larger, a light-house in trackless black oceans of space. It brightened, glared as they flashed past, and dwindled dim astern as they surged on.

Slowly Kenna turned her head to look into Larnack's dark, sardonic features.

"Lanarck." He turned and looked

down at her. "What happened to Laoome?"

He didn't speak. His face was like a copper mask. Kenna suddenly grew frightened and a little pulse throbbed in her throat as she watched him. This was no man! This was an instrument, a machine, a passionless cool thing of calculated action, micrometer reflexes. His eyes saw into her brain. Unconsciously she shrank away from him.

When he did speak, it was quietly.

"Laoome is dead."

"How?" she heard her voice say.

"I destroyed him."

There came a pause. It felt taut in her brain. Her voice broke it.

"Why?" her voice said, and she knew it only from far back in her consciousness. It seemed as if her tongue had spoken of itself.

Lanarck replied in the same distant tones.

"Laoome should not live. Of justice he knew nothing, cared nothing. He brought terror and misery and pain to untold millions." He stopped, as if in rumination. Then he added more slowly, "They were his own brain-things, true enough, but they were also live, thinking beings. The Galaxy is a cleaner place without Laoome."

Kenna regained control of her voice.

"Lanarck, is that—is that—" She stopped, at a loss for a word. "Is that right? Aren't you placing a great responsibility on your conscience?"

Lanarck shrugged.



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Illustration by
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ICE THE MAN DOWN

By WINSTON MARKS

It takes cool planning to bring a corpse back from outer space

THE advent of the long awaited "inertialess-drive" brought the stars within man's grasp at last, but after a few devastating burns he drew back like a monkey from a hot stove.

Yes, the stars had planets, and the planets, many of them, had life, teeming life, crawling, flying, wiggling, swimming, biting, stabbing, cunning, carni-

vorous, vegetatively depraved life. There was life such as mankind had never conceived, all frighteningly alien, and mostly dangerous to pallid, puffing little *homo sapiens*.

So after the first few purely scientific contacts, men of earth cringed back into their comfortable, sweet atmosphere and pulled their dreams in after them—all

but a few intrepid fools, as they were called at the time. Later, they and their descendents were honored with the name of pioneer, and they opened up the first galactic empire. But in the era in which this episode occurred, pros, or prospectors, were considered a highly unsavory, uncouth, uncultured and unstable lot.

Such a reputation had rested lightly upon the bull shoulders of Slapper Kansas until the day Claude Penrose, captain of the *Discus*, landed his ship on Centauri VIII, opened the hatch to take the first glorious breath of fresh air, inhaled a bee-like flying burr, and inconsiderately choked to death.

Slapper was right behind him at the time. Although he had no personal regard for the surly, stiff-necked captain, he picked him up by the heels and snapped him like a snake, trying to dislodge the foreign object from the skipper's throat. His heroic methods were to no avail. Penrose went rigid, then limp, and turned a dark, unbecoming, cyanotic blue. The deadly little flying creature, having achieved his unwitting murder, finally crawled out of Penrose's windpipe, escaped through the gaping mouth, and went on his innocuous way.

"There he goes!" Conkie Morton yelled, catching sight of the escaping insect. At the time no one had the slightest yen to capture the culprit. Later they decided it might have been wise.

EXCEPT for Conkie's sharp eyes they would never have known what strangled the old man; but Conkie, whose name came from his habit of conking out under anything more than a gee and a half acceleration, let little escape his camera-sensitive gimlet eyes. And his ears were so sharp he could tell you whose gut was rumbling at thirty paces. Conkie was the watchdog of the five-man pro crew under Slapper Kansas, and every man owed his life several times over to Conkie's incredible acute senses, that warned of alien dangers often be-

fore the dangers decided to become dangerous.

But Conkie's talents were of no help to Captain Penrose, and even if someone had thought of capturing the little insect, what kind of evidence would that have been?

Penrose was dead, inoperative, kaput!

The six men were standing around the warm corpse, regarding him with mixed feelings of resentment, disappointment and the awe of death which comes to all men, when the first—and now the only living—officer of the *Discus*, Richard Codley, stepped through the bulk-head from the engine room, took in Penrose's blue remains on the deck and froze in midpace.

"You killed him!" he said in a tight, scared voice.

Slapper cast a contemptuous look at the young blond officer. "He's dead, all right, but blow your nose, Junior, we didn't do it. Look for yourself. You're in charge of the ship now, so make like a coroner."

Codley edged forward and peered down at his unfortunate superior lying in the untidy heap in which Slapper had dropped him. "You killed him!" he repeated almost hysterically.

"Now why would we do a thing like that?" demanded Butch Bagley. He was the wrong man to ask this question. Butch was short for "Butcher," and Bagley had earned the name honestly by his ruthless destruction of animal life on thirteen planets. Butch took up the battle for survival where Conkie left off. Once forewarned of inimical alien life, Bagley would go literally berserk. He had more than a trace of the earth-lubber's fear of unknown life-forms, and he over-compensated for it with uninhibited violence. He was a small, straight-lipped man, lithe, intense and eternally poised like a snake coiled to strike. He wore his guns even aboard ship, and Codley looked down at them now, dropping his voice to a whisper. "You killed the skipper. I don't know why or how, but you murdered him. You'll hang,

every one of you! You'll hang, do you hear?"

He darted for the door, but one of Slapper's tennis-racket hands flailed effortlessly and cuffed him to the deck. "Make sense, man! We got nothing more than usual against Penrose."

"Mutiny!" Codley spat from smashed, bleeding lips. Slapper let him scramble through the door on his hands and knees.

"Now what upset him?" Butcher asked.

Slapper said, "Let him go. He's just scared out of his wits. The kid's only six months out of the academy, and he figures he's got a first class mutiny on his hands."

POKEY GANNET peered down the narrow corridor after Codley and reported, "He's locked his self in the ward-room. 'They's guns in there.'"

Butch shrugged. "Let him try something. Just let him."

"Shut up!" Slapper ordered, running his hand over his short hair. "Don't no one lay a pinkie on that squirt. Get this, now. We're in trouble." Just how much trouble was slowly dawning on him.

"From him?" Butch laughed with a nervous snort, pointing a narrow thumb down the corridor.

"Not from him so much as from what happened," Slapper said. "If we can't convince him that we didn't smear the skipper, how we going to make out with the port authorities back earth-side?"

Conkie said, "All we need is a witness—besides us, that is."

Butch said, "Sure. I'll go get Codley and beat some sense into—"

"Lay off. I tell you!" Slapper poised one gargantuan hand for a quick orbit, perigee of which was aimed just above Butch's neck. "Who's going to get this boat back to earth if Codley has an accident?"

"Item," said Balls Murphy, fingering the little pendulous spheres of flesh on his face that gave him his name, "Codley

[Turn page]

TO PEOPLE Who Want to Write but can't get started

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is hereafter known as untouchable. I have no passion for spending the rest of my days on this crummy hunk of mud." He scratched one little knob near the tip of his nose until it was pink. "Item," he continued, "if we do get back, we got some explaining to do."

"Unless we can prove the old man died of unnatural causes beyond our control," Sniffer Smith added. He was standing near the forgotten open port, sniffing suspiciously at the moist snatches of atmosphere that wended in from the semi-jungles of Centauri VIII. Sniffer was a metallurgist of sorts. His super-keen nostrils supplemented Conkie's superior sight and hearing. He could spot a methane bog or a CO₂-filled depression a mile off.

The warm air from outside had the freshness of growing things, but a hundred unfamiliar essences tainted it, ranging from acrid to sickly, cloying sweetness. Sniffer looked down at the corpse and his nostrils quivered. "First things first, though, huh, Slapper? We better bury His Nibs before the local fauna get the smell of terra carrion."

Slapper Kansas had none of the special talents of his prospecting crew. On earth he functioned as promoter-agent for the gang. Out here, he was the self-elected leader who enforced his foremanship with his battering, calloused hands, which he never bothered to ball into fists. With an effortless, spread-fingered slap he could floor even Balls Murphy who weighed 220 and carried it where it counted.

BESIDES keeping his "boys" from murdering the ship's crew and each other, Slapper's chief responsibility lay in doing the business thinking for all of them. Right now it was obvious that he alone felt the full implications of Penrose's untimely demise.

"We don't bury him," he said quietly. "We embalm him and take him back with us for a decent burial on earth."

Ten eyes confirmed his suspicion that his men had missed the most likely solu-

tion to their predicament. Butch voiced their sentiments in a deeply sarcastic voice. "Now ain't that sentimental of us! Should we oughta have a wake, too?"

Slapper's wrist twitched and Butch backed off. Sniffer added his complaint, "Penrose must weigh a hundred and fifty. If we pack him back that's a lot of ounces of Kegnite we leave behind—at two thousand an ounce. I say we take a vote on it, since this is a shares proposition."

"What good is a pocket full of credits with your neck in a noose?" Slapper inquired. "You oughta know what happens to pros who return without their captain—especially if there's an officer left to testify against them."

He held up a hand to stop the interruptions about to pour from five throats. "I know. You figure the only way out is to have Codley take us back to the system, kick him out and take over the ship. Well, to hell with piracy, I say! I ain't seen a spot yet I liked for a home base better than earth, and I don't figure on spending the rest of my life looking for one with the navy on my tail."

"But what else can we do, with Codley against us?" Pokey insisted.

Slapper nodded down at Penrose's remains. "Look at him. Not a mark on him. All we got to do is bring him back with us well enough preserved so they can hold a post mortem. Then to hell with Codley and his nasty insinuations. Naturally, they'd believe his word against ours, but we can swing it if we bring back the corpus delicti."

While the others thought it over, Slapper pondered the unfortunate reputations earth pinned on all extra-prospectors—reputations so low that the ratio of six pro witnesses versus one pimply, hyper-adolescent, ship's officer was inadequate to clear them in a court of law.

For the first time he wondered briefly at the gulf of misunderstanding that existed between his clan of fewer than a thousand pros, and the parent race of

earth-lubbers. If they could just know what it was like out here—

Sure, a pro was brutal! The capitalist or corporation that put up the money for these picnics thought *they* were taking real hellish risks. But how about the prospector? He worked strictly on a percentage of the cargo he scratched out of the dirt. His risk capital was his very life, and bankruptcy lay in each shadow, every blurred movement in the sky, any whispering rustle underfoot. He was preceded by no thoughtful party of biologists. No one handed him a manual listing animals to shoot on sight, vegetation to avoid, deadly gas-pits to expect.

YOU signed your contract and risked your skin, and it was your own business if you got out of the habit of bathing, when the very water often crawled with sub-microscopic organisms such as had attacked Balls Murphy. Earth medicos never did isolate the minute bug responsible for Balls's disfiguration. After months of research they pronounced the disease arrested, and turned him loose as noncontagious.

It was always thus, Slapper supposed. Men's natures changed in environments of violence and death, and the ones left behind were suspicious and fearful of what they couldn't understand.

He looked at Pokey Gannet's stained, scarred countenance. What earth botanist would recognize a kindred soul in this beefy little runt whose curiosity about extra-T flora had earned him excruciating stings, dangerous bites and near-fatal wrestling matches with predatory vines? Twice they had cut him from the acid-pulpy maws of carnivorous blooms on Gurion XI.

He still wore a square foot of skin graft from each of his crewmates to cover the acid burns.

So Butch Bagley was a sort of psychopathic killer? On many occasions his one-man warfare was barely equal to the ferocious pressures, and if he had waited to debate the morality of a situa-

[Turn page]

Grandfather was a thrifty soul but how he gambled!

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tion, they would have been overwhelmed.

Sure, they were all a little nuts. Look at Conkie Morton. The price he paid for his sharp hearing was a miserable sensitivity to acceleration. Even with the inertialess over-drive, planetary landings and take-offs required rapid velocity changes that plunged him into such violent vertigo that he invariably blanked out.

Why did a man like Conkie pick space for his apple?

Not even the pilots and crews, who flew the ships for high wages, could understand the pros. Godley, for instance, fresh out of nav-school, could spend half his life in the space service, but he'd always be a lubber at heart, content to land the prospectors and then retire safely to his cabin to read and drink for the two or three weeks before the return voyage.

Codley! Why in space was it their bad luck to have this fugitive from a nursery aboard, this particular trip? If the kid would only forget the Book and listen to reason—

"I suppose you're right," Balls admitted at last. "But how we going about embalming him? Pokey, you had any experience laying out stiffs this big?"

Gannet shook his head. "Cargo space was always too valuable. They never let me bring back any specimens bigger'n I could hide in my underwear. I suppose there's chemicals in the lab that'd do the business, though, huh, Sniffer?"

The self-styled metallurgist looked doubtful. "Mostly little dabs of C. P. reagents for analysis. Might be something, though. I haven't looked over the lab. I think Codley has the key."

They searched Penrose's uniform and affirmed that the key to the little lab was not on his person.

BUTCH and Sniffer went to the tiny wardroom and hammered on the door. No answer. Butch tapped speculatively on the latch with the muzzle of his weapon, and instantly Codley recognized

the sound. "Wait, wait!" he yelled. "What do you want?"

"Key to the lab. Open up before I burn it down," Butch snapped. Slapper came up behind the two men to sound a warning not to hurt Codley, but the door opened first. A cloud of liquor fumes rolled out, and the new captain spoke from bottled courage.

He threw a small key ring at Butch's chest. "You'll hang, damn you!" he shouted in their faces, his left hand clutching a wide-mouthed firearm. He seemed to realize he was no match for all of them, but he meant to go down fighting if attacked.

Slapper picked up the keys, then all six men moved aft toward the lab, Balls and Conkie carrying Penrose's body. They were several paces beyond the wardroom when Conkie whirled and yelled back at Codley, "Where do you think you're going?"

The blond man's back was disappearing up forward. "To get some air. This ship stinks," he screamed drunkenly.

"No you don't!" Conkie dropped the captain's head, which thunked solidly on the deck, and with Slapper at his heels he took off after Codley.

At the exit port Slapper saw that it would be a chase. He called back, "Balls, you and Pokey work on the embalming business. Rest of you come with me. We got to take the kid before he gets in trouble."

It was, indeed, a chase. On a larger planet the four pursuers' heavier muscles would have quickly closed the fifty-yard earth-mass.

Codley's first leap from the port had landed him in a bramble, where he lost his gun. When he heard his pursuers, he whirled in terror and took off like a terrestrial kangaroo.

"You killed Penrose," he screamed, "but you'll never get me!"

Slapper yelled fruitlessly for him to stop, that they had no intentions of ruining their only navigator, but Codley bounced off through the jungle, heedless of their promises.

Nothing but the threat of being stranded could have caused the four seasoned pros to pogo into the deadly thickets with so little caution. Slapper urged his crew on with a reminder. "Any minute now, something gloms Codley, and there goes our ticket to earth."

"He's gaining on us," Conkie grunted. "It'll be a miracle if—"

"No, there he is, just up ahead," Butch pointed. A dark shape was disappearing into a hole in the foliage. When they reached the place Sniffer's head snapped back sharply.

"That wasn't Codley. It was something trailing him. Don't you get that stinking scent?"

Slapper didn't, but he trusted Sniffer's nose implicitly. He plunged ahead even faster, bruising his body against hidden trunks, fighting through the rasping spike leaves that raked his hands and face and tore at his light transit jumper. They hadn't taken time to put on their leathers.

AS THEY burst into a long, narrow clearing they spotted the hunter and hunted at the far end. Codley looked back over his shoulder and cried out in terror. Butch's weapon flashed up and blasted the three-stilt-legged creature just as its saber-like beak was chopping down on Codley's back.

The black hairy carcass clipped the navigator's legs and pinned him down momentarily, but when they were almost up to him he worked free and darted into the jungle again.

"How you gonna take an ungrateful fool like that?" Butch demanded. "Let me burn a little bush around him, Slapper. He'll stop if he finds out we mean business."

"Quit arguing and get going," the foreman commanded.

It was a nightmare pursuit, chasing a man and trying to protect him from the denizens of the jungle at the same time. Twice Butch fired hastily into the sky

[Turn page]

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at flashing wings that dove for the brush ahead of them. Conkie and Sniffer fell behind, fighting a rear-guard action against a veritable parade of toothed and taloned creatures attracted by the noisy passage and warm-blooded scent.

Judging from the sounds, Slapper feared that Codley was pulling ahead again. Finally he stumbled into another clearing that sloped away into a shallow crater a mile across. It was floored with a bright orange grass that stopped him short. Butch caught up first and winced at the sight. "What do you think?"

Slapper pointed ahead. Scarcely fifty yards away Codley was down on his knees, shaking his head stupidly and gasping for air.

Then Conkie and Sniffer came up. "Ever see grass that color?" Slapper asked them.

Sniffer shook his head. "But I've smelled that gas before. Don't you get that prickle? It's carbon dioxide. Lots of moisture here. Grass must breathe oxygen like we do. Gives off carbonic acid. Stays in the moist air enough to smell—for me, anyhow. Better get Codley out fast. He'll drown in that CO₂.

Slapper took a deep breath and leaped forward, twenty feet at a jump. Codley was face down in the brilliant grass. Slapper scooped up the slender blond man and charged back to high ground again.

The distant yellow sun was setting, and before they found the ship they were depending largely on Sniffer's nose for direction and Butch's tirelessly blasting weapons for protection.

The Discus, one oatmeal bowl inverted on top of another, was a very welcome sight in the pale light of Alpha Centauri's second and fourth planets.

Slapper dropped his burden to the wardroom deck, checked the shallow breathing again, and looked around. "Where's that whiskey the punk was drinking? I could use a little."

SNIFFER had gone directly to the lab, and now Slapper heard angry voices.

He moved down the corridor. The missing whiskey bottle sat on a ledge in the lab, quite empty. Sniffer was standing over three bodies, two snoring and the one in the middle as motionless as they had left it.

"Drunk!" Sniffer announced.

"Never mind that," Slapper said. "How's our corpse doing?"

"Not so good," Sniffer said wrinkling his nose. "I told you he wouldn't last long in this warm atmosphere."

"You mean they haven't embalmed him yet?" He kicked Pokey in his heaving ribs and the botanist stirred, opening one eye.

"'Sno use, Shlapper," he said thickly. "Only found one embalming formula inna handbook. Called for two quartsa alcohol. All we found was a measly li'l pint." He dragged a 16-ounce reagent flask from under his prone body. It was still half full of absolute alcohol. "Guess Penrose'll have to rot in peace." He grinned with a weak little gesture of defeat, and sank back to the deck.

"Sniffer, you know a little chemistry. What about it?"

The metallurgist picked up the handbook, thumbed the index and read from it: "Drain circulatory system thoroughly. Inject solution slowly into the carotid artery and repeat at intervals of 15 to 30 minutes. Quantity required, from 10 to 12 pints. A satisfactory fluid consists of:

1 gallon zinc chloride solution, U. S. P.
36 ounces salt
3 quarts water

Let's see, mercuric chloride, phenol, glycerine—oh, yes, here it is. Two quarts of ethyl alcohol, 95%. I suppose we could try it with more water and less alcohol, but—"

He got a thoughtful look on his face. "You know, if we drained the blood it might not look so good to the coroner."

Conkie was eyeing the alcohol flask thirstily. "Anyhow, who knows where the carotid artery is? If we get to hacking around trying to bleed the bloke it

will look like we done him in on purpose."

Liquor being strictly forbidden by all space-navigation laws, only officers were able to smuggle it aboard. It was months since they had tasted a drop, and even Slapper had to admit there was logic in Conkie's assertion. With a minimum of further debate they divided the remaining alcohol into four painfully measured portions, added distilled water to their beakers, and toasted the deceased captain.

Butch swallowed the last of his and observed, "There, we got to have the best part of a wake after all. Now we bury the slob, huh?"

"No!" Slapper said emphatically. He wiped his reddish chin stubble with the back of his hairy hand. "Let's go see Codley."

THEY trooped back to the wardroom and found the young officer stirring weakly. Slapper lifted him into a chair. Conkie peered into the pallid face. "You look weak, fella. What you need is a drink."

"Yuh!" Codley managed.

"Well, tell us where it is. Where's the captain's private stock?"

Codley's head wobbled. "No whiskey 'lloved board space vessel. Articles of space, section ninety-six, paragraph—"

Slapper leaned over him. "Look, mister, I know what you think of us, and I ain't tryin' to change your mind. All I want to know is, are you well enough to get this coffin on its way again?"

Codley's eyes widened, but he nodded. "Sure. In a couple of weeks. By the time you get her loaded."

"We want to leave now," Slapper told him. "Soon as you get your legs back." He turned to yell at Conkie, who was sitting on Balls's shoulders jimmying open the captain's locker with a heavy screwdriver. "Hurry up with that whiskey," Slapper ordered.

The locker door sprang open, and

[Turn page]

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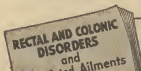
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Conkie breathed, "By the Saints, there's enough to embalm us all!" He started handing down bottles.

Slapper moved over behind Butch, who was just reaching up for his bottle. The foreman relieved the gunman of both weapons with a single jerk, jammed them in his tunic and stepped off into a corner. He roared, "I said get me a drink for the skipper, not take a bath in the stuff. Now line 'em up on the table and get out. You. Sniffer close the port and make sure it's sealed. Rest of you get ready for take-off."

"What kind of stuff is this? Goin' back empty!" Butch demanded, fingering his limp holsters nervously. "We got a marker down on a nice deposit of Kegnite. Are you strictly nuts, man?"

"Don't strain your brains, Butch. That's my job. We've got perishable cargo aboard. Now push!"

Conkie slid to the deck from Ball's shoulders. "But Slapper, we're 114 days from earth, and we agreed there ain't no way to embalm Penrose."

"We'll ice him down as is," Slapper explained. "Now go close that outer port lock, like I told you. Leave the inner lock open."

"Ice him down?"

"Sure, in space. We got no two or three weeks to do it, either. Now move!" He motioned with his great hands, and the men set their bottles on the table with bitter glares. As they filed out, Slapper grinned after them. "They're really a good bunch of boys, Codley. But then I guess you wouldn't understand. Here, have a drink."

The newly promoted skipper stiffened his back. "I don't drink with murderers."

"Oh stow that guff," Slapper said impatiently. "Penrose got a bug in his windpipe and strangled to death. You saw his color—"

"I saw you drop him on his head."

"I was just trying to—oh, skip it!" Slapper gave up. He and his crew were a band of cutthroats to Codley. The notion was as much of a ship's officer's

attitude as his fat-headed adherence to every period and comma in the Articles of Space which he was forced to memorize. It was amazing to Slapper that this duty-struck youngster had taken a drink of whiskey after Penrose's death. In fact, it was the only hopeful thing about Codley that Slapper had noticed yet.

CODLEY'S orbit was a sloppy one, which extended the trip and the suspense that gnawed at Slapper's insides. Had he done right after all? His decision was based on a feeling, the kind of a hunch you never bucked.

Yet it was an unpopular decision. Even when they were battened down comfortably in free flight with a bottle of whiskey issued to each man, Slapper kept a wall at his back and the key to the arms locker taped to his skin.

His brainstorm for preserving Penrose's body was working well. Once in space they lashed the corpse in the airlock, sealed the inner door and opened the outer. After eight hours they checked it. The deceased skipper was hard as flint, the dark color of asphyxiation still visible on his sharp features.

But would the port investigators accept even this evidence? What a bitter thing it would be if Codley managed to convince them of the pros' guilt after all, now that they had passed up the fortune in Kegnite as well as the opportunity to pirate the ship!

Slapper tried to escape the thought, but the resentful faces of his men prevented that. They wrangled with him endlessly at mess, and even as they eased gently into earth's atmosphere Butch was still trying to persuade him to change his mind.

"I've already radioed in our estimated time of arrival," Slapper said. "They're tracking us right now. So cross your fingers and hope that Penrose looks real pretty to them."

Codley, who had sulked the whole trip, made a bad thing of the landing. They jarred so hard that the inner port was

sprung and had to be forced open. When it finally swung wide and Slapper stepped into the lock, the brilliant sunshine fooled him for a second.

He had the illusion that the lashings were snapped and the body was gone.

He scrubbed at his eyes. It was no illusion.

He lurched to the outer edge of the port and stared down at a dozen assorted faces. "Did you unload a body from us?" he yelled in near panic.

"A body?" came the reply. "No, but something jounced out and smashed as you landed. You mean, maybe, this?" The official pointed at a pile of glittering shards some twenty feet below Slapper, scattered in a shapeless mass on the pavement.

He clenched his fists and groaned. He had let the boys down badly. It wasn't his fault that Codley had messed up the landing, but the result was the same.

STUNNED, he climbed down the ramp that was wheeled into place. His crew filed out behind him. At the clear-ance office the port commander said, "You demanded a board of inquest to be on hand when you radioed in. What's this all about? Where's your commander? You logged out with a Captain Penrose aboard."

Slapper could feel the rope around his neck already, but his main regret was that he had fouled up the men in his charge. "He—he met with an accident," he began listlessly. Then he stopped. He couldn't bring himself to continue that Penrose had choked to death on an insect. He scarcely believed it himself now.

Codley crowded into the small glass-walled office behind them. He levelled a finger at Slapper. "I demand this man's arrest," he said.

Slapper threw himself on the mercy of the three-man board sitting beside the Commander. "Gentlemen, all I'm asking is the same kind of justice you'd

[Turn page]

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expect in a civil court. We didn't murder Penrose."

"Who said you did?" the official asked quietly.

"Well, the kid—the skipper, here, sort of went to pieces after the accident, and he jumped to a conclusion. But he's got nothing but circumstantial evidence. You don't convict earth-lubbers on that kind of—"

Codley's voice cut across the room. "I'm not charging Mister Kansas with murder."

Slapper wheeled on him open-mouthed. Codley continued, "In fact I'm quite convinced that Captain Penrose's death was an accident. Subsequent developments make it irrational to draw any other conclusion. Foreman Kansas insisted that we return immediately for an inquest on the corpse, even though it meant sacrificing his crew's shares in the Kegnite deposit we left behind."

Slapper looked at the young, frozen face, and his hopes dropped. The penalty for mutiny was the same as for murder. He turned to the commander. "Codley can't claim mutiny, not if he's honest! Sure, I slapped him around a little, and I guess one of the men did throw down on him with a weapon once, but it was for his own good. Anyhow, we were land-fast at the time with open port. The ship was at our disposal."

"I'm quite aware of commercial space regulations, Mister Kansas," Codley

said. "I am not preferring charges of mutiny."

"Well, what in—"

"Assault upon an officer," Codley snapped out.

The commander's impatient voice finally pulled Slapper's head around. "Well, well, speak up, Kansas! How do you plead?"

Slapper's wrinkled features were going up and down like an elevator. What kind of man was this Codley? "So, like I said, maybe I slapped him around a little."

"So that's an automatic fine of 1000 credits or six months in the Lunar mines. That's so what!" the commander mimicked him wearily.

He should have felt tremendously relieved, but Slapper still couldn't bring himself to smile. He was flat broke, and so were the boys. That meant—

Codley shouldered past him to the commander's desk. "Because of certain circumstances, however, I find myself indebted to Mister Kansas and his men." He scribbled briefly on a blank chit. "Here is my draft for the amount of the fine. It seems they—they saved my life on Centauri VIII."

He dropped the slip before the commander and returned to a rigid attention. "Now if this clears up matters, sir, may we borrow a shovel and a large bucket?"

"What on earth for?"

"Due to my inept landing, the Discus lost part of her cargo, which is now littering the landing deck." He turned to Slapper. "If you'll be so good as to help—"

"Yeah, yeah. We'll help." He was beyond trying to figure things out. Like he always said, there was pros and there was earth-lubbers, and each would always wonder what made the other tick. "Bear a hand with the shovel, Sniffer," he ordered.

Sniffer Smith glanced out where the little pile of debris no longer sparkled in the hot sun. He wrinkled his nose. "Sure, sure! Just my luck!"

COMING IN THE NEXT ISSUE

NO MORE FRICTION

By DR. DAVID H. KELLER

The Fall of Man

By Alexander Samalman



The Robots learned to do the chores,
Wash dishes, mix hot toddies—
Then evolution came along,
Deprived men of their bodies.

The Cybernetics thought and thought,
Wrote books, were widely read,
Philosophised and mastered arts—
And then Man lost his head.

With head and body gone, alas,
Men were no Einsteins, Morgans—
But just a mass of jelly with
A bunch of vital organs.

And even then machines clicked on,
Man's soul to further vex—
Contriving gadgets that could eat
And gimmicks that could sex.

Oh, what alas, man's destiny,
Sad was the fate approved—
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COSMIC ENCORES

(Continued from page 6)

An anthropologist recently gained much notice in the press because he ventured to predict how the human race will look 5,000,000 years from now. Through selective breeding and the science of genetics, he said, man will turn into a well-adapted biped with more finely developed hands. His feet will by that time be no more than flat, circular bases for legs, and the legs in turn will only be pedestals for the torso and head.

Because of Earth's loss of oxygen, men will increase their lung capacity and live at a slower tempo. Less muscular effort will be demanded, and mental abilities will be developed. Perhaps, the anthropologist suggests, we'll even breed for ESP traits, so that telepathy will replace speech. This, he feels, would preclude the possibility of war, secret alliances, surprise attacks and the like.

The only thing remarkable about such a picture of the future is its lack of imagination. This is the quality that science-fiction writers bring to their task and it makes all the difference in the world. Just for a single example of what we mean we'd like to call your attention to a story coming up in *Startling Stories*. It's called AUDREY'S MOON and is by a new writer, Thomas Kerish. What he does is to consider one aspect of the problem of how to use telepathic powers, and he suggests that telepathy is more likely to cause conflict than peace. Silence is often a blessing, and if telepaths were subjected to each other's thoughts all day long, they'd soon be ready to commit murder just to get a little peace and quiet.

On the subject of future development, however, it seems to us that the anthropologists didn't give us much hope for improvement. If 5,000,000 years doesn't carry us further than he suggests—with only more delicate hands, atrophied feet, and a more efficient brain to look forward to—it's questionable whether there'll be many spectators on hand to see the last act of the show.

LETTERS FROM OUR READERS

ONLY ONE THIS TIME

by Ron Ellik

Boy, oh boy! Haven't you learned your lesson yet? It's been about a year since you printed two of Calkins' letters in the same ish, and you haven't

lived it down quite. And now you go and pull the same stunt over again... Not that I mind, y'unnerstan... But when do you think the fen will stop hounding you now? I can imagine it. Keogh, Clarkson, Cox, all sending in six letters an ish, to see if you'll do it with them, too.

The best part of the zine was the ad for THE BRASS GOD on page 9. Second best is the artwork on page 63. Real scope, imagination and mood. I'd rate as third the blurb across the page of SEE, saying "The sex problem we dare not face." It shows you're willing to break taboos, and print material dealing with sex. When are you going to listen to the fans and print some lewd pictures?

To be more or less serious, I'd like to applaud the reprinting of Ed Hamilton's FORGOTTEN WORLD. You realize of course that this will bring outraged cries from Three Bridges to the effect of You're printing other Hamilton so why the Hell not Captain Future?, don't you? But FW is a real harker-backer. Way back. Reminds me of stories like STAR KINGS and THE CITY AT WORLD'S END and YANK AT VALHALLA. Bunch of terrific space-opera.

I've never really liked Gerry Carlyle series. She and the rest of the characters always seemed sort of "card-boardish." I read three or four of them (the stories) in SS, and consistently found them dull, unadventurous, and pure gimmick-fiction. They're all based on some new animal. Reminds me of Cap Future, where Hamilton would drag in the new zoo each story to foul up the Cap'n. I didn't enjoy TROUBLE ON TITAN any more than I enjoyed HOLLYWOOD ON THE MOON or THE HOTHOUSE PLANET. Their only worth is imagination-stirring reading for a relaxing biophysicist.

Manx is back! I don't know how many of these stories there were, but I have never grown tired of them yet. I'd buy an ish of FSM just for Petro Mancos' whacky wanderings. However, I keep wondering what happened to the good Arabian when Pete was jerked back through time and the real owner of the body found himself hanging on by one arm to a cord tied to a balloon, and holding up a fat old baboon with the other—hundreds of feet off the ground! (And, by the way: Where do the real owners of these bodies go when Pete is using their carcasses?).

This recent run-around you pros have been giving us is certainly for the worse. Now when you go to the stands you see yellow-journalistic sheets claiming to be typical stf zines, and giving the public bad impressions. I remember back when I was shelling out for nine or ten mags every so often, and enjoying every one of them.—232 Santa Ana, Long Beach 3, California.

Yes we did get lots of comments on those two letters, but we're brave enough to face all storms. We're only printing one from you this time, although you sent in ten, hoping to have

the letter column all to yourself. However, that plot has been foiled. Leading off with your detractors, we hear first from a reader who has raised the blood-curdling cry of . . .

J'ACCUSE

by Dick Clarkson

What ho! Off we go again! J'accuse, it says here! Remember last year what happened to Gregg Calkins when he wrote in too many letters and got two printed in one issue? Yeah, the Doghouse. Well, what do we do with our mutual, and seemingly over-productive friend Ellik, here? Not one, but two, count 'em, two letters in the Fall FSM. Generosity is a true virtue, but there exists to everything a point of diminishing returns, and you have hit it.

I seem to be snakebit on this letter; my fingers wander without any control, and the typos are rattling off here in true Thrilling Pub tradition, though I'll never equal your linotype operator. Seriously for a minute, though, for your information and that of interested parties, there exists a house on the outskirts of Cambridge which, for well over a year, has been run on solar power. The roof is full of plate glass or mirrors or something—looks funny—but every appliance in the house has been run off the sun for quite a time. They haven't got any of your batteries yet, though, because their whole roof is dedicated to the proposition of collecting sun heat. I suppose someone lives in there, though I never saw any signs of habitation, but it must get awful hot there in the summer. I'd trade all the mirrors in the house right now for a cold beer, because the icebox has been empty since the household money gave out.

By the way, I've always meant to ask you, do you ever reprint the original illos to go with the reprint stories, or do you always use new illos as a matter of course? 'Twould seem to me a good way to save Thrilling Pubs some money, which might go to the more interesting pursuit of publishing FSM more frequently. I guess a lot of the illos have already gone to Convention auctions and such, but it might be good once in a while to reprint the original illustrations as well. Not that Finlay doesn't adorn the mag, but between your three mags and others, the poor boy must be slightly overworked.

Quick pass to Russ Brown: Man, I'm *really* gone! Anyone as good as gone as I am (that makes sense?) is to be envied, not warned. Don't you agree?

Think I'll drop a line to Paco Morillas. I always did want to carry on a fannish correspondence in Spanish.

I think you would do well to revive all the Pete Manx stories. They are excellent, though not quite after the Padgett Gallagher line, at least comparable to Crossen's series. Somehow, I have always been partial to a series of humorous stories which touch the light fantastic concerning one character, possibly because I seem to be an odd-accident prone myself, though in not quite such a spectacular way. I get traffic tickets, for violating Ordinance 997, 1950. I look this up and it has to do with trans-

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ferring parcels of land at the city's cost between Cecil and Harford counties. I have to appear in court, and I still don't know what I did. Just for example.

Keep that format on the FSM cover. Best there is in my own opinion. I'm going, I'm going—the typo's will get us both.—410 Kensington Road, Baltimore 29, Md.

In answer to your question about illustrations, we always have new ones made. This gives the artists more work, stimulates the national economy, primes the pump, and makes the magazine look better. Besides, every new Finlay female adds new fuel to our flames and makes our gray hair turn black again.

MORE ON ART

by Peg Robinette

Thank you!

For what?

Bradbury's "Promotion To Satellite," naturally. Who's tsanda? New to me, Lorelei was really good. For that matter so were the others.

Science Fiction Teen-agers, I liked it. More

Cosmic Encores: Condit. I agree with him on one point. Men should give up trying to write from a woman's point of view. Believe me it just can't be done.

Now to the artwork.

Cover—My what big eyes you have.

Finlay—He can do better than that. (A God Named Kroo). The Lotos Eaters—that proves it. Martians twitter—more proof if you need it.

Of the three by EMSH the one for A Thousand Futures rated tops.

As a whole I found Fantastic close to the top as usual.

And now I shall sneak out to post this. Wha? That noise? Ugh! My ever present Martian bodyguard just caught up with me. Can't someone help me lose it.

No! I must be followed always by the dreaded Zuk. I go.—Box 732 Paintsville, Ky.

Thanks for your comments on the stories and the artwork. Your words are so pleasing that I almost wish I had time to rescue you from the Zuk. But since he seems to be rescuing you from something else, perhaps I'd better let well enough alone, passing on to a man with many suggestions:

WE LIVE AGAIN

by Tom Condit

I have returned! You may all live again . . .

Hmph! FSM, Fall 1954, 7#3 . . . Cover takes one back to the good old days . . . No relation to contents . . . Only thing missing is the Bergey girl.

The stories: Pete Manx still funny . . . strikes me you missed the first story in this series. I read it in Phil Stong's anthology and its a dilly. . .

The Carlyle Gerry is either still magnificent, or I'm suffering from nostalgia very badly . . . How about more Carlyle and Hollywood On the Moon? (*Hollywood On The Moon*, TWS, Apr. '38; *The Pal World*, June '38; *Doom World*, Aug. '38; *Satellite Five*, Oct. '38.) Kuttner and Barnes were alternating with one in every issue in this period, the start of the binary series. *Seven Sleepers*, this one is missing from my files so I can't give the ish but it was tres magnifique, I think there was one called *Roar of the Rocket*, etc. There was a Carlyle tale as late as 49 I believe . . . *Forgotten World* fair, but awfully recent. Lots of better and scarcer bits . . . *The Last Man In NY*, fairly good . . . And let's see . . . Oh, yes! Another cornball by Dryfoos.

Features: Pome ver' good! (For a Change) . . . The final weapon okay . . . "Communication with alien intelligences could begin with mathematics . . ." This is news? This page of reshaped info from ancient sf tales could be dispensed with . . . And now, now . . . It's almost too horrible to face . . . It . . . It's . . . Cosmic Encores!

Keoghs Surprisingly, I enjoyed TLOC when I reread it. Actually, the era of 1946-49 was the Golden Age of Science-Fantasy. Kuttner, Heinlein, Bradbury, Brackett, Wilcox, they were all in their top form. But there was plenty of good older stuff, and there was no excuse for a 1947 story, especially one recently issued in pocketbook form.

It is with great sadness that I learn of the strange fate of Haphwitt. The cunning of SaMines in thus bringing psychological warfare into this is another example of the ruthfulness of the Nudnick faction. The foolishness of their basic premise that Nudnick is a reliable historian, is easily proved by his own statement (in *The Downfall of America*, Cosmos Press, Vaduz, 2005): "The greatest factor in the destruction of civilization in these nations was a strange mental disease known as science-fiction, which preyed upon the mind until the victim found himself wandering around muttering such phrases as "The pic on p. 87 o' fsm last ish was Bergeyish. The The Makron that drew it should be dis-gunned at dawn and pickled in xeno," or "Scramgravy is too wavy." The sloppiness of Nudnick's research is shown in his inability to distinguish between science-fictionitus and sfanitus. The latter disease being the ancient malady he describes, a disease older than science-fiction itself, tho greatly spread by science-fiction.

Ellik: Once again the proofreaders have goofed up a Mines pun. Or am I wrong in assuming that this was to be entitled "Walk, Do Not Ron"?

McCurdy: This boy has talent.

Clarkson: Tell me, what do you mean by work? The exams await you, mán, so put down that poor Radcliffe girl, take the needle off that Tom Lehrer record, and return to those books! NOT THE SF BOOKS! There, now that the truant has been dealt with, we can proceed . . .

Brown: Not meaning to contradict you or anything (Not much), but Ouchmiachingbak was actually the third person to use the editorial we. Whochmboegh originated it in the Jul 17, 1823 issue of the *Pajaronian-Scimitar* (He was very lonely . . . not only was it a one man paper, but the town hadn't been founded yet). It was then picked

up by the pioneer fan Runon Dieseloil, editor of the early fanz *The Scramgroovy Gazette*, in the 1825-31 issue (#6507). Dieseloil had a good reason, as he was two-headed. Then, and only then did Ouchniachinbak pick it up, in the April 1830 *Beer Barrel Forum and Distillery News*. There is, of course, the fragmentary evidence that the form was used by Astrobert the Idiot, scribe of the *Missi Dominici Missive* in the Brachmanoth 795 issue however, this may have been during one of the periods when Astrobert was beside himself.

ELLIK AGAIN??!!!!

I agree with Fletcher.

Please give us *Evans of the Earth Guard* and *Cities in the Air* by Hamilton and *The Red Ace* by Key, from Air Wonder, and *The Moon Conquerors* by Romans from SWQ. Merwin practically promised us the Romans tale, and its time the neofen were exposed to Life on the Moon.—1454 Court Street, Redding, Calif.

Nope, that loud gusty noise wasn't a hiss. It was merely a mighty collective exhale from all of us who were awaiting your return. Glad to have you amongst us again. Also, we're glad to have all those suggestions for future reprints, which have been duly noted in our files. As for the cover, how about this issue? Walton and Schomburg worked hand in hand.

WHAT NUDNICK REALLY SAID

by Pat Strong

What's this? Oh, no, No, NO! There are two Elliks, count 'em, two (2). As for starting in on the Hoghen series though, I'm wit' him. Could we have some of those, could we, could we, huh?

To Brown: you have hisquoted the good professor Nudnick. What he really said was, "Gasp, choke, help, Air!" You have confused this true statement with one made by an enterprising young Aldebaranian reporter; in a press release designed to cover up the whole sordid mess.

The Illos in this ish were really good. I might

[Turn page]

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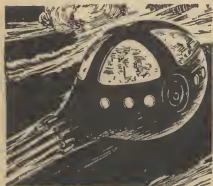
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HIS EYES BUGGED OUT
 by James Chamlee

Last week or so I glanced through FSM at Waco (a town where I usually have to buy sf), and, not noticing my letter mentioned, I passed FSM by for SS. I couldn't get both as I usually am bludgeoned to death with a ray pistol for getting any s-f, and too, I'd already bought a stack before I found FSM.

Today, on a second trip, I did get it. And what did my bug-eyes behold!!?? My full length letter, and at the head of the column yet. Where did I deserve such glory?? I keess yourr han', mon-sewer.

Say, on Popp's cover for the summer ish, where de dobbie is the poor gal goin'? Our friend the giant is gonna have a bad case of spot blindness if she decides to set up house in there. In amongst the retina and all.

Ah—hah! To your stations, men: all-out war! Break out the sub-ionic displacers! Train all the peanut-smasher 161.8906', clockwise!

Nooowww, my friend—LENGTHEN THE LETTER COLUMN!!!

Bing! There's the bell. End round one—208 North 9th, Gatesville, Texas.

We've also heard from John Mussells & Ralph Butcher, 3971 Boone Park Avenue, Jacksonville, Florida, who seem to have a four-handed typewriter for their letters. They claim the Keugh letter was too short and find in this the evidence of a deep-laid plot, but it ain't so.

We've also had word from George Hopkins of Kansas City, Mo., who sent a copy of the local fanzine THE GALACTIC HERALD. It has a remarkable cover—handpainted in oil. Something went wrong with their silk screen process, but the various members wielded paint-brushes valiantly, and the result was a very bright cover. They swear they won't do it again. In case anyone in the Kansas City area is interested in contacting the club, they might get in touch with Peggy Lee, 6436 Agnes, Kansas City, Mo.

And that ties up for this time. See you next issue!
 —THE EDITOR.

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